

BOOKMOBILES AND BOOKS BY MAIL:
NOT AN EITHER OR PROPOSITION

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"Confronted with a geographically dispersed clientele and the high costs of developing new library sites, public libraries have sought to develop and implement various mechanisms for reaching out beyond the physical confines of their present facilities to deliver materials and services. Current practice involves using, most commonly, bookmobiles and books by mail, occasionally supplemented by depository collections or portable structures such as kiosks.

Current means of delivering library service have been developed primarily to extend library service to suburban and rural populations and to urban populations where conventional branches are not economically feasible. In some instances, libraries have also made special efforts to reach the home-land, institution-bound or the non-traditional user.

In extending services, such delivery systems are being employed in an effort to utilize resources more efficiently and effectively. Today this effort is particularly important as public libraries are beset by demands for accountability and cost-effectiveness."

Bookmobile service and the books by mail program are both essential components of library service in rural America today. This is not, however, the viewpoint taken by many in the library field. They believe these programs are either detrimental to library service altogether, or only one of the programs is necessary in a county. This writer feels both services are necessary to reach as many people as possible in the rural community.

This paper is not a comprehensive overview of bookmobile and books by mail service. Of concern here are the types of service each of these programs offer, and the value of each in rural America. Therefore, there is no discussion of bookmobile specifications or the operational details of either ser-

vice. The emphasis will be on the objectives of each program, their advantages as well as disadvantages and how they are adjusting to our changing society today. Some time will also be directed towards current trends in each of these areas. A brief history is given to each service to provide some general information.

"For well over four decades library service by bookmobile has been ardently discussed in library conferences, affectionately and colorfully described in professional and popular magazines. Human interest stories connected with bookmobiles abound, for no other form of book distribution has lent itself so readily to romance and adventure. Early pictures showed the horse-drawn 'surrey with the fringe on the top' bookwagon, then bookmobiles in the snow with librarians in flowing skirts serving patrons wearing high-topped shoes, men on horseback with books in their saddlebags waiting for the bookmobile, boys and their dogs, and readers standing expectantly in the rain ready to exchange their books. Bookmobiles became synonymous with glamour heralded as the supersalesmen of library service."²

This is, of course, a romanticized picture of the bookmobile librarian. However, it does indeed emphasize the vital role played by the bookmobile. It services children, young adults, and adults, who, for some reason or another, cannot reach a library.

The bookmobile has not always been an important service of the library program. Bookmobile service began in 1904, when Mary Titcomb, librarian of the Washington County Free Library, Hagerstown, Maryland, saw to it that books at rural deposit stations were changed regularly. This was carried out by the library janitor who provided the service with a hired horse and Concord wagon. A year later, Joshua Thomas, the janitor, drove out in the rural areas:

"The new book wagon resembled a cross between a grocer's delivery wagon and the black hearse of the village undertaker. At first, some farm folk were reluctant to use the strange new 'book contraption' which they called the 'dead wagon.'"³

This was soon overcome.

Motor vehicles were then used for bookmobile service, although the term "book wagon," from the days of Joshua Thomas' horse-drawn wagon, stuck. This phrase was used until the mid-1920's to describe the motorized bookmobiles. Exactly when and where the term "bookmobile" was first used is not known.

According to M. L. Berger, by the mid-1920's,

The presence of these early bookmobiles, with the name of the local library emblazoned on their sides, was probably a contributing factor to the renewal of the reading habit in rural America during these years. The new means of transportation, combined with its unique literary function, brought knowledge of the county library to even the most remote farm⁴

The use of the bookmobile was not only confined to the farms. It was recognized that the bookmobile could be a most beneficial means of assistance for school libraries, which did not have much to offer at the time. Bookmobiles could visit county schools every month or so, leaving children's books as well as professional books for use in the classroom.

The Works Progress Administration, with its many demonstrations involving bookmobiles, did a great deal to further the development of service in the last 1930s and early 1940s.

By 1937, there were only about 60 bookmobiles in the United States, mostly in the southern states. North Carolina was the leader in the development.

The American Library Association recognized the rising interest in bookmobile service in November 1948. ALA issued a summary of a study conducted by a specially-appointed committee of the Library Extension Division on thirteen bookmobile topics. The results were inconsistent, but the information gave encouragement to people interested in the idea of bookmobile service. Then in 1951, the ALA Extension Division's Bookmobile Committee issued a 20-page

booklet on "Bookmobile Standardization." It was mainly concerned with the physical aspects of bookmobiles.

Large numbers of specially designed bookmobiles did not come into use until after World War II. Even then, many libraries were still using converted vehicles, rather than carefully designed functional vehicles equipped to handle the load over rough roads. Nevada's first bookmobile was a "converted ambulance purchased for the Washoe County Library from army surplus."⁵

The federal Library Services Act which began in 1956, was to provide money for service to rural residents. Between 1956 and 1968 some of this money was spent for bookmobiles to demonstrate library service to rural residents.

Bookmobile service began to expand rapidly at this point. In 1960, Library Trends devoted an entire issue to "Current Trends in Bookmobiles." Then in 1963, ALA issued a 16-page document entitled "Standards of Quality for Bookmobile Service," which considered the uses and limitations, organization and operation, scheduling, materials, staff, physical aspects, and headquarters, in concise form. These standards are still used for modern bookmobiles.

In 1979, the Public Library Section of the Kentucky Library Association collected information to update the bookmobile program of the state. The committee's final recommendation was as follows:

"Given the current emphasis on extension services and upon reaching those patrons unable to use the library as it has traditionally existed, operated, and been organized, there is a great possibility that the service can reach patrons who can be reached efficiently and effectively in no other way. The aged, the young, the rural, the handicapped, the economically and socially disadvantaged all need a service which is often far from their neighborhoods and which is not likely, for a number of reasons, to be permanently located in these areas; for these patrons some form of portable extension

service seems the most feasible answer; and bookmobile service seems the most suitable, most efficient and effective form of such services."⁶

There are several important qualifications necessary to have a successful bookmobile program. The program developers must be knowledgeable and dedicated, and the librarian must be concerned, involved and aware of patron needs. The frequently rotating book collection should reflect the needs of the patrons. The bookmobile should maintain a regular schedule, and provide maximum service. Flexibility is also important in administering bookmobile service and making necessary adjustments to improve service.

The value of positive community relations and publicity to the success of the service should also be emphasized. Because bookmobile service is so dramatic and has such high publicity value it is most important that it be good service. According to Eleanor Frances Brown,

. . . it should meet the standards of a well-chosen, appealing book collection; a competent, carefully-selected staff with at least one professional librarian for each bookmobile; a wisely-planned schedule; and efficient operation. The bookmobile itself must be the proper size and type to do the job for which it is intended. Poor service is worse than no service at all, because it engenders dissatisfaction with the entire idea of bookmobile operation and reflects upon the reputation of the library providing it.

Basically, libraries with a large service area and a low population density benefit most from bookmobiles. Bookmobiles have been an effective means of distributing books in isolated districts and rural schools. They can reach the portion of a community that would not be able to get to a regular library because of distance or lack of transportation. The collection may also supplement the resources in the area schools.

Bookmobiles have been utilized for exhibits, demonstrations, projects, services to schools or other agencies, and for visits to low-income neighbor-

hoods. They also serve as a link to the central library and can promote its services. Not only does the bookmobile promote the public library, but in itself it is a promotional tool-in the eye of the public at all times.

Another service provided by bookmobiles is that they can be used as guides to determine the best locations for future permanent facilities. Costly mistakes can be avoided by this service. A bookmobile can test many different locations for a future library, whereas once a library has been built, it is not easily moved.

Patrons can directly examine library books in the bookmobile. Personal contact with the patrons provides valuable information to the reading tastes and needs in order to help with the selection of materials. The informal atmosphere can also attract patrons. Close ties can be built between librarians and patron, which is also good public relations. It can also save the patron time and money.

The confines of a bookmobile may attract patrons because of the size of the bookmobile and the compact collection. As mentioned previously, there is also the attraction of the term bookmobile.

The bookmobile is not as expensive to operate as a branch library. It can also provide temporary service until a permanent facility can be erected.

Most bookmobiles will not be able to provide the above mentioned services. However, carefully planned program, based on the needs of the community, with a well-trained staff and a good collection will provide the best service.

There are limitations to bookmobile service, limitations inherent to bookmobiles, and other problems.

A basic short-coming of the bookmobile is that no matter how well planned it is, it cannot serve as a substitute for a good branch library. The collection is limited in scope and size because of the lack of space. Reference service is usually limited for this reason also.

One of the major problems associated with bookmobile service is the high cost of maintenance and repair. The staff is often untrained in preventive maintenance or emergency repairs and when a bookmobile is in a shop for repairs, library service is usually temporarily discontinued. This disruption of scheduling can be detrimental to the development of an efficient program. Gasoline has also become more of an expenditure. The weather and road conditions are also hard on the bookmobile.

Size prevents research and studying from taking place in a bookmobile because there is not usually room for tables and chairs. Browsing space is also limited. It is difficult to find adequate room to arrange displays, promotional materials, listening materials and other library services.

Bookmobile stops are usually brief, as a wide area must be covered. The arrival time may not fit the schedule of most working people. The infrequency of visits also limits the efficiency of the library service provided, and as mentioned previously, weather conditions and mechanical problems can further deter this.

With a limited amount of space, it is difficult to provide library instruction to groups. It is also hard to provide any type of school instruction due to the lack of space and the lack of useful material available for school assignments.

Due to some of the limitations mentioned earlier, and other factors, many questions are being raised as to the validity of bookmobile service today.

This problem has been the focus of a number of library discussions. Specifically, at a meeting held at the Piscataway Public Library in New Jersey, it was advised that bookmobile librarians make use of statistics to build a case for keeping bookmobiles on the road. Statistics should include the number of people at each stop, the number and type of materials circulated and the number of reference questions handled.

Another means of justifying the bookmobile service in light of shrinking funding and energy resources, is to use the bookmobile to provide non-library services. An example of this can be found in Selma Dallas County, Alabama, where the bookvan was made more valuable by using it to serve the illiterate as well as the reading patrons. Additional services found in various counties include: Blood pressure and diabetes screening, plant clinics, skin care demonstrations, puppet shows, films, and clown performances.

A modern and up-to-date type of bookmobile is found in the Washington County Library System in Mississippi. The Bookmobile carries a microfiche card catalog of the entire library system. Located at the bookmobile desk is the catalog and a microfiche reader which occupies less than a square foot of space.

An inexpensive and original vehicle used to provide bookmobile service is found in the Coastal Plain Regional Library of Tifton, Georgia. When one of their bookmobiles was totaled in an accident, a sportsvan camper was converted to a mini-bookmobile. Because of its size, the van is easy for one person to operate and the mini-bookmobile meets the needs of the community it serves.

As a final example, a unique type of bookmobile service can be found in Alaska. According to American Libraries,

The goals of the book boat project are to stimulate use of the Alaska State Library's mail order service and to provide direct service to the 8,000 people living throughout southeast Alaska's scattered coves and bays. Many people in the small logging and fishing communities had never experienced the pleasure of browsing in a library . . .

Another unusual feature of this program is that it is through the coordination of church, state, federal and local efforts that the floating library is an effective alternative to traditional library service.

BOOKS BY MAIL

With the changes occurring in society today, it is necessary and important for libraries to examine and revise their services if they are to be most effective. One of the most important implementations is the rapid growth rate of the books by mail program.

The primary objective of books by mail service is to extend the traditional book and media material lending services (a) to people who, for various personal reasons, cannot visit the stationary public library facilities, whether they be a main, branch, or a mobile unit, and (b) to people who have not been served by the traditional public library because they live in rural areas without a town or city large enough to have an established community library.

The books by mail program has not always been the significant service that it is today, although it was prominent in the early stages of library development. In fact, "the conception of an organized and publicized books by mail or home delivery service available to all library patrons was the vision of a handful of individuals, until the 1960s."¹⁰

Home delivery was an essential part of the service offered by many of the circulation and subscription libraries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the turn of the century, many counties did not believe in bookmobiles; they circulated more books by mail than over the counter.

The first text on county library service (1925) emphasized that mail service should be offered as a major alternative form of service even when there was a well-developed system of branches and stations and suggested that transportation costs, both ways, should be assumed by the county library. An ALA publication on library extension standards (1926) stated that a good county library provides mail service to anyone.¹¹

The period of greatest development in home delivery by public libraries extended from about 1900 to 1920, coinciding with the relative decline of the private circulating and subscription libraries, and immediately preceding the widespread ownership of automobiles. Since that time, these services have gradually declined in some areas while entirely disappearing in others.

There were a number of reasons for the decline in books by mail service. Bookmobiles were becoming more popular, and serving a large population of the rural areas. There was also some fear that delivery systems used by large libraries would undermine the development of local branch libraries. The increase in the number of automobiles, allowing for greater mobility, also aided in the decline.

Another contributing factor to the decline of the home delivery service was the inactment of the Library Service Act. These funds provided bookmobile service and helped establish branch libraries and new library systems. Today, however, this is changing, as some funds are now being directed towards books by mail service.

Interest in mail delivery of library books was revived in the early 1960s. An important influence in this revival was due to the grant awarded to Norman Lyon of Washington Public Library by the Council on Library Resources. This grant allowed Lyon to conduct a twelve-month experiment with a home delivery service which included mail delivery. At this point, many people were becoming aware that there was a definite need for books by mail as a

major alternative service to complement the services offered by branch libraries.

The first national discussion for individuals interested in mail order library service was held in San Francisco in June 1967. The meeting endorsed the books by mail program which emphasized a free, widely publicized service.

"By 1975, more than one hundred and twenty U.S. public libraries were reported to have some form of mail delivery service known variously today as Books by Mail, Mailbox Library, Mailibrary, Mail-A-Book, or Mail Order Library Service."¹²

Cost is one of the main advantages of a books by mail program as compared to bookmobile service, which in many areas has caused a reduction or change in bookmobile service in favor of books by mail service. Factors which necessitated these changes were:

- (1) the realization that present library services may no longer meet the needs of all residents,
- (2) the rising cost of fuel,
- (3) bookmobile mechanical problems, and,
- (4) financial inability to replace the bookmobiles.¹³

Books by mail provides access to all people. It can reach people who do not have a public library. It can reach people who have no transportation to get to a public library, or who are disabled or home bound for other reasons, temporarily or permanently. It can provide service to people who are home only certain hours of the day, which is something a bookmobile cannot do.

Another contributing factor which makes books by mail service popular is that it is convenient to the patron. The patron does not need to leave the home and never needs to worry about library hours or bookmobile schedules.

According to A. W. Kelley,

. . .for the entire staff, especially the professional, involvement in the books by mail program has a very important implication far beyond the circulation of library books . . . [it is], a professional reader service whether or not recognized as such. . . Books by mail is an excellent vehicle of communication between the staff and the patrons. It is also a built-in feedback system that will keep the staff in time with the shifting patron interests and demands. Books by mail works as an automatic selection guidance system for new acquisitions and for continuous renewal of the library collection.¹⁴

Although books by mail service offers many advantages for library service, it does have its limitations. Some of the major disadvantages are reviewed below.

In 1979-80, discussions were held at the Graduate School of Library Service of the University of Alabama. Some of these discussions focused on the usefulness of books by mail service. A research study was funded, and one of the major findings was that:

Books my mail, as presently practiced, is an inadequate form of service for young people. The study strongly suggests that a books by mail program discriminates against children and young adults because of the nature of many books by mail catalogs. These catalogs are often times characterized by language and reading levels that are incomprehensible to children. In addition, some are unattractive and poorly designed with few if any illustrations. Instructions for use may be excessively complex. The collections described in them often fail to reflect or excite the reading tastes of young adults."¹⁵

According to Norma McCallan in Library Trends, a survey was done concerning bookmobiles and books by mail service. Although it was a very small survey, some of the results do have relevance to books by mail service today. When asked the question "What do you feel are the major problems associated with the program?" the replies are listed below in order of frequency:

1. U.S. Postal Service
2. Not enough use, hard to reach all eligible patrons
3. Lack of personal contact with patron; lack of personalized information service
4. Limited selection of books, heavy demand for certain titles; hard to guess which items will become high in demand, requiring additional copies

5. Costs of postage, books and service
6. Provides only recreational reading; not for serious readers or students
7. Inadequate circulation¹⁶ controls; hard to get books back on time; hard to collect fines.

It is also impossible to provide reference materials through books by mail. Magazines and non-print media are rarely circulated through books by mail, although this practice has succeeded in some areas.

Rising postal, printing and distribution costs, and budget restrictions which can reduce the size of the catalogs can limit the effectiveness of the books by mail service.

Another problem that may arise stems from the suspicions of the public librarians who see the books by mail program as direct competition to their own local library. They do not view it as an essential part of a library program, but as a detriment.

Choong Kim states that ". . .some librarians have been disappointed that books by mail has not uncovered great numbers of new readers. This service, which simply makes books available in a different way, cannot be expected to put a dent in the great numbers of non-readers."¹⁷

Books by mail programs are becoming increasingly popular in rural library programs. Many libraries are now using commercial books by mail service.

As of 1976, there were about fifty-four books by mail programs around the country serviced by the American Companies' (Topeka, Kansas) Mail-A-Book Catalog and paperback service. Among the most plausible reasons for this trend are the following:

- (a) For an inexperienced books by mail program, the stake in the success of the program is very high. An assurance of a reasonable degree of success is very important, especially when the beginning program is financed by a short-term federal fund. Such a program has little time to gain first-hand experience or to have the plan tested in the field before fully implementing it.
- (b) Crucial to beginning a rural-type books by mail program are a dependable and adequate supply of paperbacks, and timely catalog preparation and distribution on a regular schedule.

The interruption of either will result in the loss of both service and patrons. In ¹⁸this area, the commercial service may provide some assurance.

Kim also notes that a commercial service should never completely substitute for local preparation of special catalogs and collections designed to meet the special needs of the local community.

A number of books by mail programs around the country are now adding nonbook materials to their circulating collections, especially 8mm films and audio cassette tapes. They are continually experimenting with different types of materials to see whether or not it is feasible to mail them. Telecommunication facilities will make telephone calls to library centers easier and less expensive in relation to other traditional communication means.

The role of publicity has been important in promoting books by mail service, as many people have been unaware of the program. The following have been used in publicizing books by mail and have been successful: flyers, newspaper articles, interviews on local television talk shows, programs and slide presentations for various community groups (senior citizens, garden clubs, civic clubs, schools, etc.) and exhibits at local fairs.

A current trend in books by mail service which accounts for some of its popularity with librarians, is its continual emphasis on the use of the local public library. In Vermont where there is found a very successful statewide books by mail program it has been found that books by mail had not seriously hurt traditional library service.

In conclusion, it should be remembered that the books by mail program is not a

. . . substitute for, nor a replacement of library's standard services; it is a regular library service in its own right. . . Its natural strength lies in its ability to reach almost anyone who has

an address and a mail box. This ability adds enormously to the sphere of library service and its influence. It can overcome many barriers to the library service--great distance, geographical barriers, neighborhood, downtown traffic, and parking problems, time, socio-economic and cultural barriers."¹⁹

Bookmobiles and books by mail programs should offer specific resources and services to library users who are not obtaining these through other means. Goals should be well developed and programs should be alert and responsive to the changing needs of their audiences. Any service instituted should have evaluative components that monitor and provide feedback to administrators so that adjustments can be made to help ensure the attainment of program objectives. Libraries should take care not to establish such priorities on the basis of convenience to the library. In addition, the community itself should be involved as much as possible in the establishment of priorities.

Both bookmobile services and the books by mail program are a necessary part of library service in the rural areas. Both are needed because they reach different people and sometimes even meet different needs in the same people.

As long as the programs are up-to-date and meet the special needs of the patrons, these services are a worthwhile and necessary part of library service. They can do much to promote the library in rural areas where this has not been done in the past, and is much needed. The people need to become aware that their needs can be met and their questions answered at their local public library.

FOOTNOTES

¹Alex Boyd and James Benson, "By Mail or Mobile Unit? - Developing Programs for Extending Library Services," Public Libraries 20 (Fall 1981): 67.

²Eleanor Frances Brown, Bookmobiles and Bookmobile Service (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1977), p. iii.

³Ibid, p. 14.

⁴M. L. Berger, "Reading, Roadsters, and Rural America," Journal of Library History, Philosophy, and Comparative Librarianship 12 (Winter 1977): 46.

⁵Brown, p. 30.

⁶Danny C. Gunnells, "Bookmobile Update '79: Extension vs. Convenience Service," Kentucky Library Association Bulletin 44 (Spring 1980): 19.

⁷Brown, p. 45-6.

⁸"Alaska Library Afloat," American Libraries 4 (July 1973): 416.

⁹Choong H. Kim, Books by Mail (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 23-4.

¹⁰Robert T. Jordon, Tomorrow's Library, Direct Access and Delivery (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1970), p. vii.

¹¹Jordon, p. 12.

¹²Kim, p. 3.

¹³Lynnette Whitlock, "It's All in the Bag," Georgia Librarian 18 (February 1981): 5.

¹⁴C. K. Kim and I. M. Sexton, "Books By Mail, Sleeper of the 70's? A Survey Nails Down Some Facts," Wilson Library Bulletin 47 (May 1973): 777.

¹⁵Boyd, p. 67.

¹⁶Norma J. McCallan, "Delivery Systems and Programs," Library Trends 28 (Spring 1980): 543.

¹⁷Kim, p. 174.

¹⁸Kim, p. 164.

¹⁹Kim and Sexton, p. 778.

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¹⁷Kim, p. 174.

¹⁸Kim, p. 164.

¹⁹Kim and Sexton, p. 778.

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