

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS:
BOOKMOBILE SERVICE

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Bookmobile people are a race apart. They work outdoors, but know what's on the best seller list. Through daily contact with experts they learn a lot about such topics as wood heat, home building, vegetable gardening, raising horses and collecting antiques. Bookmobile librarians carry information from library to library, and not just in the form of books. If they do not know the answer to questions, specialists back in the regional office visit the small, rural library and try to offer solutions. The bookmobile staff of the Western Massachusetts Regional Library System try to solve problems, awaken ideas, always striving for better service.

The bookmobile originates from the library system in Hatfield, which is situated in the Connecticut River Valley, halfway between Vermont and Connecticut. The system serves sixty-seven libraries in towns of less than 25,000 people. Most of the libraries are rural, one room, single manager

operations with limited hours (rarely more than 15 hours a week).

The bookmobile visits each library five times per year. The staff tries for an eight week schedule, but with vacations and breakdowns often does not make better than an eleven week rotation. Considering how badly the rural libraries need the service, such a delay is inexcusable.

The bookmobile provides supplementary collections for the libraries; the general public does not borrow directly from the bookmobile, but from the local library. The librarian, assisted by a trustee or townspeople, choose material from the 2,000 titles carried on the bookmobile. They return the collection borrowed during the last visit.

The bookmobile staff also makes some "homestops", which were established years ago by the state at isolated farms or at a home where there is a shut-in. At the homestops family and neighbors borrow books, with the homestop family taking responsibility for the return of the books. Two of the homestops regularly circulate 150, or more, books each visit.

The Western Massachusetts Regional Library System has two bookmobiles, but runs only one at a time. The other is for back up, but at this stage it would be difficult to say which vehicle is the regular and which the backup as they both

spend most of their time in the repair garage.

In 1971 the bookmobiles cost 25,000 each; by 1985 each had traveled 75,000 miles.

Last winter the bookmobile survived a lot of mechanical problems. A wheel blew off near Wendell. What with the noise of travel no one heard it happen. When the bookmobile reached the library, and it was realized that there was only one wheel on the rear passengers side, and we were twenty miles from a garage, we knew we had trouble. The librarians walked back along the road until the wheel was found; that was important as the tire was fairly new. One does not just pop a wheel off a bookmobile and replace it like you do on a car - a repair garage had to do it for you. The whole episode took about 8 hours, and service to two libraries that day (though we did make it up before the end of the month), was missed.

The bookmobile librarians have been stranded in snowy desolation with a broken roter. The alternator has gone bad on rough back roads where the inhabitants were afraid to let strangers use their phone. The bookmobile operated for two months in mid-winter without heat because the heaters could not be fixed. All five people who work on the bookmobile have become sensitive to the noise of the engine. The slightest change in its voice awakens apprehension in every breast. If

it starts without a hitch and rolls out of the garage our day is made!

The grim picture can be balanced. We live in a beautiful part of Massachusetts and at every time of the year as we go on daily trips, we congratulate each other on our choice of a job.

Last fall a teacher at Bement School in Deerfield asked us to show the children what a bookmobile is. The class had discussed books and libraries and incidentally, bookmobiles. When the second graders were asked what a bookmobile is, one little girl replied it was a group of wires, hanging from the ceiling with books attached. We were only too glad to clear up that misconception.

The children came on the bookmobile, class by class, fascinated with the woman driver, the tilted shelves, the noisy generator. They could not borrow books, as the system does not have the funding to allow loans to schools. Afterwards children sent the staff letters expressing their interest in the big wheels, fold out steps and especially, the books.

The bookmobiles are a proved economical means of loaning books. Each quarter the bookmobile circulates 25,000 to 30,000 books at a unit cost (for transport) of under five cents per volume. A library can not match that using the mail! Nor

Can one match the personal satisfaction that a librarian gets from choosing her own books, trying out new types of material at no extra expense to the community, and voicing gripes on the spot to people who can do something about them. The bookmobile staff are winners, too, because the personal contact gives us a solid idea of what must be bought to make the collection responsive to the needs of small libraries.

On a normal working day the bookmobile leaves about 9 a.m. with two people aboard, the driver and an assistant. One day each week the regional librarian goes out instead of the assistant. The collection on the bookmobile has been primed beforehand with books of interest for the library stops that day and the collection is seeded with a few new titles. If the stop is a heavy user of large print materials, the staff checks each one of the 200 titles carried to make sure none of them have been to the library before. At appropriate times small collections of holiday books are included.

The tedious part of the job is the circulation cards which have to be stamped, counted and put in order after every stop. The Western Massachusetts Regional Library System is in the process of installing an automated circulation system which eventually will take care of all of this.

There are better days ahead! Last year Massachusetts ran

a state-wide campaign to increase regional funding from the legislature. Aware that bookmobile service was in danger, the patrons of small libraries deluged the legislature with letters and phone calls. The libraries received state funding and money for new books is coming in. By the fall of 1985 the system hopes to have a new bookmobile. It will cost \$92,000 (which is more than the cost of my home!) and will be funded by combined state and LSCA money.

Here in Western Massachusetts we have the best of both worlds - a chance to spend a day in the country, helping people keep abreast of current events and provide talking books. We look forward to fifteen more years of bookmobile service, knowing we will enjoy every one of them!