

"READING RAILROAD" or THE SEARCH TO SERVE
CHILDREN WITH WORKING PARENTS

Rebekah Sheller
Youth Services Librarian
Lewis & Clark Library
Helena, Montana

In Lewis & Clark County, Montana there are 3,500 pre-school aged children, yet only 40 to 60 attend story time on a weekly basis.

In fiscal 1985 the average cost of children's books was ten dollars. In 1983 there were 2,500 titles published for children.

Three interesting but unrelated figures, you are thinking. Not necessarily so. There are more books to choose from, the bookstores (and grocery stores) promote "Kool-Aid" books (my term for Strawberry Shortcake and Care Bears type material), people have less time to choose books and lack the expertise to make good choices. Combine these figures with the fact that many young mothers are working outside the home and you begin to see why this library in Western Montana was challenged to rethink its traditional programing for young children.

In an attempt to reach children of working parents the library offered an evening story time during the winter of 1983-84. It was not entirely successful. Cold weather has adverse effects on our Thursday morning storytime and the evenings were even more afflicted by the cold. After the evening story times ended many of the parents were able to bring their sons and daughters to the morning storytime, so obviously we were not reaching the audience intended.

The library circulates an average of 2,500 children's picture books a month, so we know parents and children are visiting the library and reading at home. We wanted to assist these parents in their selection of books, attract new patrons to the library, and fit this all into the patrons' schedule, instead of forcing them to meet the library schedule.

What we came up with (borrowing an idea used by the Kent County Library System in Grand Rapids, Michigan) was "Reading Railroad".

The purpose of the project called Reading Railroad is to encourage parents to read aloud to their preschool children, and to acquaint parents and children with a wide variety of picture books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, poetry and non-fiction books.

To run this railroad the library needed capital.

Expenses would be incurred for promotional materials, book marks, reading lists and other hand outs. Because the theme of the project was railroads, we assumed an interest would be generated in trains, or rather books about trains.

Like most libraries this city/county library does not have an abundance of money - not for setting up programs and not for additional (superfluous) books.

The Youth Services Librarian decided to request grant money from the Burlington Northern Foundation, assuming since the project dealt with railroads, and the BN Railroad is a major industry in Montana, its foundation would be interested in children interested in reading about trains.

Her assumption was correct! The Burlington Northern Foundation awarded an \$800 grant to LCL; the library matched that with a \$550 commitment of staff time and library resources.

Reading Railroad "left the station" during Children's Book Week, November 1984 and has been running steadily, but slowly since then.

The library publicised the Reading Railroad with announcements on the radio and a story in the newspaper. Red and white posters were distributed around Helena to places frequented by people with small children, such as day care

facilities and doctors offices, plus grocery stores, the shopping mall, and downtown.

Children's Book Week came and it was time to sign up. The library showed a movie, "What's So Great About Books?" (borrowed through Interlibrary Loan from the Boise, Idaho library. The cost of renting the film was payed for by grant money.) The movie was shown three times to accommodate different schedules.

There were 14 people who signed up the first week. One important aspect of Reading Railroad is that it is geared for the public, and not for the library staffs' convenience. Thus, people can sign up for the program anytime.

The staff at the Information Desk (we do not staff the children's area - not enough staff) signs someone up for Reading Railroad explaining these details: the parents read aloud to their child (we suggest 15 minutes daily) from a list of suggestions we give them, keeping track of the books on a simple chart. When one chart is completed (10 books read) the child receives a train car to color. Each visit they get a different car - an engine, coal hopper, box car, etc.

The suggested reading lists change on a monthly basis. (At first we changed the list every two weeks, but monthly seemed to be sufficient.) We made very general suggestions,

such as share an alphabet book or share a book about dinosaurs. Book marks listed many of the suggested fiction titles, and Information Staff made suggestions, or helped locate, non-fiction titles. Part of the idea of Reading Railroad is to introduce the children and their parents to different parts of the collection and different areas of the library (Children's non-fiction is shelved with adult non-fiction). After the children have "read" 60 books, and received 6 railroad cars to color they are finished with Reading Railroad. Hopefully, the reading aloud habit has been established and will continue. Also, the staff hopes people are into the habit of coming to the Information Desk for assistance. (Not everyone realizes we help children as well as adults at our one Information Desk.)

It may seem that \$1,300 is an awful lot of money to run a program for preschool children. But there are other things to consider. First, half of the money from EN Foundation was used to purchase books about trains such as TRAIN TALK by Roger Yepsen and FREIGHT TRAIN by Donald Crews for the children to read. Next, the libraries matching funds were for the Youth Services Librarian's time in setting up the program, doing the publicity, and maintenance, the time of the other staff involved, use of meeting rooms and photo-

copying of railroad cars. This Reading Railroad time was not in addition to my regular duties, but part of my job as Youth Services Librarian. A year earlier my time was spent preparing and doing evening story hour. The third point is that I had lots and lots of material printed up with grant money paying printing costs. There are enough book marks and supplies to promote the program in fiscal year 1986.

Participation & Evaluation

Participation in Reading Railroad can be described as moderate. In all 34 adults with 39 children signed up for Reading Railroad. The average age of the children was 3.5 years. Fourteen adults signed up for RRR during Children's Book Week, the remainder at various times during the 7 months the program has been in operation.

Circulation of picture books from November 1984 through May 1985 was 20,213 - a three percent increase over the same period a year earlier. Lewis & Clark Library has an automated circulation system, thus keeping close track of the books circulated. However, all non-fiction is shelved together, so there is no accounting of the non-fiction children's books (fairy tales, dinosauria, animals, etc.)

circulated. I simply assume that Reading Railroad had a positive effect on the circulation of non-fiction materials, too.

Reading Railroad, in my opinion, did not reach many non-borrowers; it did not bring new people into the library. This was not a major goal of the project, but it was a goal. The staff did not keep track of the number of people completing the program - we don't know how many children got the caboose.

Reading Railroad is a tool for library users and a way for parents to introduce their children to a variety of books: this was a goal I feel we reached, although there is no tangible evidence of this to present.

Other positive aspects of the project are enhancement of the collection of books and stories about trains; slight increase in circulation; a service to working parents that was flexible and fit their schedules; non-competitive rewards for the children.

Reading Railroad was also a public relations bonus in two ways. It helped show the community that the library has an active Youth Services program - an important detail since this library did not have a children's librarian on staff for several years. Reading Railroad also looked good to the

library board and the city and county commissions. It is apparent we hustle - we are out looking for alternative funding, not relying entirely upon the tax levy.

Lewis & Clark Library will offer Reading Railroad again this fiscal year. We will try to do a few things differently. First, we will begin the project as soon as school starts. Next, it will be promoted during mid-winter and participants will be given a "perk" or some type of incentive or reminder to keep participating. Instead of handing out train cars to color, another type of reward will be offered, perhaps stickers of trains, or something inexpensive but fun. Since the library was able to purchase stories and books about trains, displays to promote these books will enhance promotion of the program and the books.

If you have questions about Reading Railroad or want more details of the project contact:

Rebekah Sheller
Youth Services Librarian
Lewis & Clark Library
120 S. Last Chance Gulch
Helena, MT 59601

Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope and I will respond to any questions you have.