

# BOOKMOBILE SERVICE IN INDIANA: ITS HISTORY, ITS PRESENT, AND ITS FUTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the bookmobile has played an important role in meeting the needs of the reading public and in providing information to a broad segment of society. But in the past few years, bookmobiles have fallen on hard times, and their demise has long been predicted. They have fallen victim to such things as the gas crisis, construction of branch libraries, and automation.

Bookmobiles, or traveling libraries, are an extension of the services offered by the conventional library. Usually, a bookmobile is operated by a public library system and it travels on a scheduled, repetitive route to schools, small towns, crossroads, and shopping centers. Its driver is often also the librarian. The inventory of materials it carries varies, as the librarian tries to meet and anticipate patron interests and information needs.

During the past decade this outreach service has been enhanced by wireless technology. Bookmobiles can connect to the main public library and exchange information; the Internet and other technological innovations provide easy access to electronic information sources. These bookmobiles, sometimes called "electronic bookmobiles," "online bookmobiles," or "cybermobiles," expand the universe for individuals beyond the reach of the traditional bookmobile (Khalil).

This article describes the past and present and tries to identify future trends of bookmobile service in Indiana. Our study focuses on 1954 to the present. We chose 1954 as the starting date because statewide bookmobile statistics appear not to have been kept prior to that year. We gathered information from a variety of sources including published articles, Indiana State Library records, and developed a survey instrument in an effort to evaluate the evolution of bookmobiles and to identify trends and changing services.

Library users of the baby-boomer generation growing up in any of Indiana's rural communities fondly remember, and many still utilize, the services of their local library's bookmobile. Just as profit-making businesses are always working to increase their cus-

tomers base; public libraries are constantly striving to gain new patronage. Ideally we would like all those taxpayers who financially support the library to use the library and benefit from its services. Reaching out to the far corners of the library district is a priority goal for all public libraries. Of course libraries approach outreach in many different ways depending on the size and population of the library district. The traditional library outreach mechanisms provides books and other materials to those who are unlikely or unable to reach the physical library. According to recent studies, bookmobiles and branches have been the two main service outlets used nationwide by public libraries. Of the 8,981 public libraries in the United States in 1995, 1466 or 16% had branches and 819 or 9% had bookmobiles. The number of libraries, branches, and bookmobiles that each state has varies greatly. That year Hawaii had 1 public library with 48 branches and 6 bookmobiles, while New York 's 741 public libraries had 326 branches and 11 bookmobiles. Kentucky's 116 public libraries had the most bookmobiles with 103 (Public...1995 24-25).

One of the most unusual systems in the nation is found in Wakita County, Oklahoma. When the 1973 tornado destroyed all five library buildings, it was decided that a totally mobile library, which now includes nine bookmobiles, would best serve service to the rural farm community. One unit houses the automation system and the satellite link to the Internet and another unit is in charge of ordering and processing materials. The librarians work fireman style shifts, twenty-four hours on and forty-eight hours off since one unit is always on call. Each unit is linked to the Internet and many carry 15,000 items (Wakita).

Nationwide, Indiana's library service ranks very well. In 1995 Indiana ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in the number of public libraries (238), 15<sup>th</sup> in the number of branches (189), and 7<sup>th</sup> in the number of bookmobiles (43) in the United States. Indiana's effort to make library service accessible to all by providing a high number of library outlets has paid off. In 1995 Indiana libraries loaned over 10 items per Indiana resident, ranking Indiana 2<sup>nd</sup> in the nation for the number of circulation transactions per capita (Public...1995 127).

The Allen County Public Library had up to seven bookmobiles on the road in the early 1960's, two serving users within the city limits of Fort Wayne, two serving children during the summer months, and three serving the county areas. As of 1992 they no longer have any bookmobiles. Instead each of the county's suburbs has a new or expanded branch facility (Slater-Putt 163). Due to a breakdown in 1998, the Shelbyville-Shelby County Public Library no longer has its bookmobile visiting rural towns and schools, but consideration is being given to replacing it and re-vamping the service. The Wells County Public Library had a bookmobile serving the county for 60 years. However, a need for major repairs and more patron services took the bookmobile off the county roads in 1990. The library replaced it with two new buildings and an additional branch.

## METHODOLOGY

A search for scholarly literature and studies on bookmobile services in Indiana was not productive. While several articles and case studies of single bookmobiles or single library systems were found, a study of Indiana's overall bookmobile service was not found. Studies have been done on the national level by the Center for the Study of Rural Libraries. The most recent study was done in 1997. This study, earlier studies, and a review of the literature by The-wei Hu for his book, *A Benefit-Cost Analysis of Alternative Library Delivery Systems* written in 1975, all have found a lack of available hard data on bookmobile costs, users and service. Apparently bookmobile service is not an area in which states, or even local libraries, have historically kept a wide range of statistics. Therefore, researchers have used surveys to gather information for their studies.

The Indiana State Library has gathered and published statewide statistics on public library service since 1954. The only statistic kept on bookmobile service is the number of bookmobiles each library system owned. In 1954 there were 15 bookmobiles in the state owned by 12 libraries. By 1962 the number doubled and steadily increased to a high of 54 bookmobiles at 42 libraries in 1986. Libraries of all sizes owned bookmobiles. Sixty percent of the bookmobiles belonged to libraries with populations between 25,000 and 99,999. Only one library, serving a population of less than 50,000, had more than one bookmobile in their library system. By 1986 Boonville-Warwick County Public Library, with a service population of just over 20,000, had added a second bookmobile to help increase circulation when the city and county merged their library services.

The State Library statistics did provide a list of all the public libraries in Indiana that have or have had a

bookmobile. Since 1954 a total of 56 libraries have had a bookmobile in their history. Today 36 libraries have bookmobiles, so the number has significantly decreased.

To obtain data for this study, a short survey was developed. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions relating to the beginning of bookmobile service, reasons for the increase or decrease of service over time, number of stops and hours in use, kinds of places served, the type of vehicle used, and any special features of the bookmobile. Brevity was an important factor since our goal was to receive a high number of responses as quickly as possible. In order to reduce both time and expense, e-mail and fax were chosen as the form of communication and the initial mailing was via the Indiana public library listserv. Since it was not known how many of the libraries would be reached through this listserv, additional mailings were planned.

Two weeks and 18 replies later, the questionnaire was again sent to the non-responding libraries via the library director's e-mail address obtained from the State Library Directory. Those libraries with no e-mail address were faxed a copy of the survey. This mailing resulted in an additional nine replies for a return of forty-eight percent of the targeted libraries. This was a very good response rate, much higher than the 9-30% received in other national bookmobile studies. The authors of this paper are indebted to those libraries that supported the survey with their cooperation.

## RESULTS

Before the advent of bookmobiles, many libraries provided outreach services. These services were often in the form of deposit stations set up in such places as general stores, post offices, fire stations, industries and even private homes. A collection of fifty to a few hundred books was provided and then changed at regular intervals. In some instances, these stations were even mobile. While the Gary Public Library initiated their bookmobile service in 1951, they had a "traveling branch" in 1937. How a traveling branch differed from a bookmobile is not known and is an example of one of the inherent problems of this research – terminology. Many libraries consider anything on wheels, horse drawn or otherwise, to be a bookmobile, while others make fine distinctions between delivery and bookmobile service.

At least nine of the dozen libraries offering bookmobile service in 1954 actually had their service much earlier than that. While literature indicates that the nation's first book wagon started on its way around 1905, there is much discrepancy with dates and terminology. While Fulton County Public Library claims to be the first in Indiana and the second in the United States to offer bookmobile service beginning in 1921,

Indiana's start may have been in 1918 in Gas City-Mill Township. "The wagon service was begun on February 22, 1918" offering a "house-to-house service." The Gas City bookmobile was built on a Ford chassis and it looked "something like a patent medicine wagon" (Hughes 9). During this time there was a growing movement in Indiana libraries "to bring to the farmer and his family the incalculable privilege of getting acquainted with the world of books" (Hughes 9). At least seven Indiana bookmobiles were put into use in the 1950s and five in the 1960s. The Greensburg-Decatur County Public Library may have been the last library in Indiana to initiate service when it began bookmobile use in 1985. In 1998 Evansville-Vanderburgh Public Library renewed the service that was discontinued in the 1970s.

The appearance of the bookmobile has changed over time. Fulton County's first "resembled an old hack wagon used to transport school children." The Monroe County Public Library's first bookmobile in 1929 was an "original Model A Ford Truck." In 1930, the Allen County Public Library bookmobile was constructed on an International Harvester chassis and had shelving both inside and out with a capacity of 1000 books (Slater-Putt 161-162). This concept of inside and outside shelving was still evident when the South Bend Public Library began its first bookmobile in 1953. The vehicle cost nearly \$8000 and could accommodate 2000 books (Waterson 28). Many of the survey respondents did not give details about the types of vehicles previously used, but at least nine said that they had an RV type. Nine mentioned having had buses, three had vans, and one each had a truck/trailer, a box truck, and a pickup pulling a modified trailer. More information was given on the present bookmobiles. These range from small step vans to vehicles forty-foot long that have a capacity of 5000 volumes. Nine libraries claim to have a bus; six have RVs, and three have step vans. One has a truck without a trailer.

Among those libraries still offering bookmobile service, most have automated them in some fashion. While most use laptops for circulation, not many are actually online. Data is downloaded into their automation system at a later time. Anderson and Kokomo-Howard County Public Libraries are among those with an online connection and Monroe County Public Library uses cellular technology to connect to the library automation system, e-mail and the Internet. Other special features on today's Indiana bookmobiles are wheelchair lifts, ramps and skylights.

Of the twenty-one libraries that responded and still provide bookmobile service, none seem to provide service only to rural areas. Fourteen libraries provide service to both rural and city patrons and six service mainly city locations. One is "moving away from rural

'crossroad' type stops in favor of captive audiences." The survey did not ask for a completed bookmobile schedule from each library, so in many cases there is only information on which areas a particular library serviced, not how many schools or nursing homes were visited each week by the bookmobiles.

Most stops seem to concentrate on the young or the elderly. Bookmobile services are also changing as public libraries redefine their missions, according to Carol Hoe, outreach consultant. Many outreach programs now focus on serving the disadvantaged, or targeted groups such as the elderly or children in daycare (Evan 18). Two responding libraries provide service to assisted living facilities and ten to nursing homes. One goes to a senior center and another to a county home. One library has eight elderly housing stops and one visits retirement apartments. Fifteen service daycare/preschools and fifteen also visit schools. The LaGrange Public Library sends its bookmobile to twenty-five Amish schools. Anderson and Porter County Public Libraries make visits to jails and Kokomo-Howard County Public Library visits a juvenile detention center and in-home daycares. Four libraries make stops at apartment complexes, two stop in mobile home parks and one stops in a housing addition. Other stops include: an industry, a church, a hospital, and a facility for the handicapped.

How much time do bookmobiles spend on Indiana roads? While the hours varied from ten to forty hours a week, the average for the responding libraries was thirty-one hours. Two-thirds of these libraries make biweekly stops, but some are weekly and monthly. A few libraries said that their bookmobile schedule changes frequently to meet changes in patron schedules. Some have different school year and summer schedules and the Porter County Public Library reviews new sites and rearranges the schedule every four months.

The stop and go use of a bookmobile is hard on the vehicle thus repair and maintenance are the biggest problems for bookmobile service. The need for repair and/or replacement is often the reason libraries start reevaluating their service. Gas City-Mill Township, Mishawaka-Penn and Wells County Public Libraries all cited cost and physical problems among their reasons for discontinuing service. Other reasons for reducing or discontinuing bookmobiles were reduced service area, reduced circulation, and adding or expanding facilities and branches.

Few responded to the question that addressed the reason for discontinuation of service, probably due to the fact that most of the respondents still use bookmobiles. However, the most frequent reason given was the opening or expanding of a branch. When the Allen County Public Library ended their bookmobile service

in 1990, Associate Director Steven Fortriede said, "It's not so much the bookmobiles' time has ended as it is the branches' time has come" (Von Frank).

While adding branches can be the reason to stop bookmobile service, it has often been the reason to start the service. Over the years, several libraries have used the bookmobile to test sites for future branches. It has also been used to replace a facility that is no longer seen to be viable. The most popular rationale for the bookmobile is to serve populations too small to have a branch and those populations situated in areas that cannot easily access the nearest branch.

While several libraries still visit small, out of the way communities, none of the responding libraries limits the bookmobile to just this role. In Indiana, libraries are filling up their schedules with stops for two growing groups of immobile, unserved patrons—children and the elderly. In our working society, daycare centers are increasing in number. This large population of children is unable to attend toddler times and after school programming. Instead of worrying about getting these children to the library, the library is going to them. An example is St. Joseph County Public Library's Readmobile. This library-on-wheels contains only children's books and visits first through third graders at schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged children. In the summer, the Readmobile visits other sites including city parks and daycare centers (Fosmoe).

In his article entitled "The Bookmobile and Its Future," Richard L. Waters states, "The average life span in 1900 was 47; today it is 79 ... By 2040, twenty-one percent of the population in the United States will be over the age of sixty-five" (Waters 39). Therefore, it is understandable that bookmobiles are beginning to visit retirement communities, assisted living centers, nursing homes, and senior centers. No matter how close the nearest library facility is, it will not be close enough for many of our elderly who are ill or who simply do not drive. Today we do not need to drive to the country to find a population that is isolated from library services.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered from this survey indicates that bookmobile service in Indiana is declining, slowly and steadily. It is on the downside of a bell-curve that gained momentum in the 1950s and peaked in the 1980s. Bookmobiles may be a real rarity on Indiana roads by the 2010s. Our research indicates bookmobile service, while declining, is actually transforming. Instead of outreach bookmobile service, libraries seem to be leaning to personal delivery service. In January 1999, the Eckhart Public Library in Auburn replaced its 12-year-old, repair-ridden bookmobile with a smaller white van nicknamed EMOS, Eckhart Mobile Outreach

Service. EMOS delivers materials to homebound, daycare centers, home daycares and nursing homes (Prentice). Even today personal delivery service may be more prevalent than bookmobile service in libraries. This trend is seen in the kind of stops bookmobiles are making and in the delivery of materials to individuals by staff in a small van rather than the traditional bookmobile. In addition, one wonders how many libraries are making these nursing home, daycare, and jail stops under the title of "outreach," "homebound," "delivery service", or "mobile library service" rather than the standard terminology of "bookmobile service."

Another significant transformation of library outreach services may be seen in the new "online" bookmobile. An example of wireless technology at work can be seen at Muncie, Indiana Public Library's Cybermobile. This online bookmobile is equipped with six computer stations, all with Internet access, through a satellite and modem connection. 1999 marked the first full year of Cybermobile service to the Muncie community. It is used to teach Internet and computer skills to children, the disadvantaged, the elderly, and others. The library networks with a variety of community groups to reach as wide an audience as possible. Some of the groups receiving classes in 1999 included: Adult Literacy/English as a Second Language, Isanogel Center, Muncie Homeschooling Cooperative, Head Start, Community Corrections, and Forest Park Senior Citizen Center. In addition, training workshops have been held at Ball Memorial Hospital and Farmland Public Library (Muncie).

There is no doubt about the advertising and public relations value of a library's bookmobile. Everywhere the bookmobile travels, it delivers a visual reminder of the services available to each and every resident of the community. The goals and purpose of the Anderson Public Library bookmobile service are clear and very representative of those libraries still offering the service today. Their survey response stated, "Bookmobiles are a method of advertising library services, showing the kinds of materials libraries have, getting people signed up for library cards, and projecting a friendly, courteous manner in a non-threatening environment. We hope to turn more people into users and that they will take advantage of the services offered downtown."

Our research leads us to conclude that Indiana libraries will continue to provide services to those who cannot make the trip to the library building. Indiana residents are top promoters and users of bookmobile services. In the future, resources and services may be delivered by library staff driving a van or a cybermobile. The physical appearance of the bookmobile of the future may be uncertain, but the future of the bookmobile "tradition" is clear. The dedication of bookmobile administrators and staff ensure that it will be bright.

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