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Providing Access with Bookmobiles: A Chapter in the History of Georgia Libraries

By Rebecca Hunnicutt

One of the most important aspects of being a librarian is to provide access to services and resources to communities. As librarians, part of our role in serving patrons and communities is to find new, innovative ways of making resources and information accessible. One such innovation in the last several decades has been the progressive transition from print to electronic resources. Many libraries are doing away with print periodicals and now provide access to these resources online. Acquisitions departments are purchasing fewer books and DVDs and are instead providing access to digital resources

like OverDrive and Kanopy. These services provide patrons with the ability to check books out online and stream videos on their computers. Libraries are also incorporating makerspace areas, 3D printers, machine readers, and more. These examples show how libraries are making resources more accessible by providing new products and new technology. In the early 1900s, however, advancing technology was not the driving force for innovation; some could argue it was simply accessibility. It is possible to draw this conclusion based on the newsmaker of library communications in the 1930s and 40s and the state project in Georgia: the bookmobile.

Bookmobiles are small libraries on wheels that travel into more rural or economically disadvantaged areas of a state. Throughout the history of this service, bookmobiles have utilized a wide range of transportation modes, from pack mules and wagons to bicycles and

buses. During the 30s and 40s in Georgia, bookmobiles were motorized vehicles, like the automobiles used in other areas of the country. Many areas updated their modes of transportation through the years; for instance, in Washington County, Maryland, the horse-drawn carriage that had been used since the



Photograph of interior of bookmobile, Clarkesville, Habersham County, Georgia, 1950. Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/northeast/do:sop53309>

year 1905 was replaced with a motorized vehicle around 1920 (Bashaw, 2010, p. 32). Just as modes of transportation have changed in bookmobiles, so too have the resources and services they provide. In the early 20th century, books were the main resource, but now a bookmobile can provide patrons with the ability to “look up information on a computer, print a paper for school, and check out DVDs” (Bashaw, 2010, p. 32). They now house hundreds to thousands of resources, depending on the size of the vehicle, and provide a multitude of services. One thing has not changed: they have always been staffed by librarians or library employees.

To understand the need for bookmobiles in Georgia, one must look at the history of the state. In the 1920s and 30s, studies and discussions at library conferences resulted in the identification of a problem: the unequal division of services among libraries throughout the state. Librarians concluded that “there should be consolidation of small and thinly populated areas to form larger areas of service” (Harris, 1949, p. 300). One reason for the consolidation of smaller libraries into larger, regional libraries was directly due to finances (Harris, 1949, p. 299). The hope of merging funds between local, state, and federal sources drove the consolidation, as financial support was lacking at the time due to the Great Depression. Additionally, Georgia libraries “did not benefit” from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which had provided half a million dollars to the South in 1929 to allow for experimentation with new county library services (Harris, 1949, p. 300). For these reasons, libraries within the state began cooperating with one another to combine and form regional libraries. Over time, many of these developing regional libraries began buying and using bookmobiles to further their ability to reach more rural areas of the state. In doing so, many more people were able to connect with libraries and their resources.

With their dedication to mobile services and an understanding of the need for this type of outreach, libraries and librarians throughout the state worked with the State Home Demonstration Council to coordinate efforts to fund and mobilize the ever-needed bookmobiles with a demonstration bookmobile (“State Bookmobile,” 1949, p. 1). As stated in a Georgia Library Report, on June 16, 1949, the Home Demonstration Council presented a demonstration bookmobile to the State Department of Education, which was the first bookmobile to be owned and operated by the state (“State Demonstration,” 1949, p. 1). During the presentation of the bookmobile, the state superintendent of schools accepted the bookmobile and pledged “it would be kept well supplied with a stock of books for all ages and

would be operated by the Library Division for the purpose of demonstrating the advantages which this type of library service gives to the rural people” (“State Demonstration,” 1949, p. 1). The superintendent also dedicated the bookmobile to the memory of the “farm boys and girls” of World War II who sacrificed everything and implemented the slogan “Searching for Knowledge to Build Better Tomorrows” (“State Demonstration,” 1949, p. 1). The Bookmobile Georgia Report (1950) showed that this demonstration bookmobile, in its first year, crossed more than 16,000 miles of Georgia roads and stopped in 75 counties, with 30,000–35,000 visitors and more than 15,000 signatures in its register (p. 7). This was a great success for Georgia libraries, and due to the reach and importance of these bookmobiles, more counties began purchasing them.

Bookmobiles were even funded by community organizations, such as the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, for use by African Americans (“Bookmobile,” 1950, p. 7). Groups like the Delta Sigma Theta sorority noticed an inequality of access to needed services among their community members, and they did what they could to provide those services. As a non-profit organization that focused on serving the African American community, Delta Sigma Theta began a bookmobile initiative that lasted for 20 years (Amundsen, 2017). As stated by Denise Glaudè, Chair of Archives and Heritage for the New York Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, the initiative began in the 1930s out of an understanding that there was a “lack of something critical for improvement and education, books...” (Amundsen, 2017). Due to this lack of books and through a focused effort, Delta Sigma Theta purchased the Ford bookmobile in June of 1950 and transported it from New York to Georgia to serve the rural areas of the state and provide access to resources for the African American community (Amundsen, 2017).

During the first half of the 20th century, many Georgia residents lacked access to library

resources, as shown by the need for equality of services within the African American community, which was recognized by the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and statistics from the Georgia Demonstration Bookmobile. For some, this lack of access was extreme, and, while things might not be as difficult for most today, this continues to be an issue. Many areas of Georgia still have a need for services, which allows for the continued use of bookmobiles. In 2017, the Gwinnett County Public School System (GCPSS) purchased, retrofitted, and transformed an old school bus into a huge bookmobile. Wilson (2017) stated that the GCPSS Bookmobile began travelling around that district on June 1, 2017, after the committee that created this resource analyzed data from the United Way and determined which areas of their district would be most impacted by the bookmobile's presence during the summer months (p. 11). This retrofitted bus held 5,000 books from public school media centers throughout Gwinnett County, had 35 stops on its route, and in "it's first 7 weeks made 245 stops and had 5,248 visitors who borrowed 7,607 books" (Wilson, 2017, p. 11). If you do the math, that is nearly 1,100 books checked out per week: an amazing number! This is another great example of data supporting the need for mobile services. Based on these statistics both in 1949 and 2017, it is easy to see how necessary library access is and how much it is valued by the community.

The uses of bookmobiles and the outreach they provide are limitless and are recognized as an important service for libraries, as evidenced by their inclusion in the American Library Association's sponsorship of National Library Outreach Day (formerly National Bookmobile Day), which takes place during National Library Week (American Library Association, n.d.). To participate in this celebration, anyone can research their county library system to determine whether their local library operates a bookmobile. If so, patrons can find the schedule and visit the bookmobile at one of its locations to take advantage of this fun resource.

Community members can also ask about donating items to a bookmobile to help increase its collection. There are 10 bookmobiles currently utilized across the state of Georgia and operated through the public library system, and these bookmobiles travel to "community events, day cares, senior centers and more" (Georgia Public Library Services, n.d.). Library bookmobiles provide many other services besides checking out books; for example, patrons can access Wi-Fi through the Chattahoochee Valley Libraries bookmobile, and the Forsyth County Public Library provides "an interactive screen on the exterior of the vehicle for programming and internet access" (Georgia Public Library Services, n.d.).

Not only can public libraries utilize bookmobiles, but academic libraries can too. Smith (2017) described how Lane Library, located on the Armstrong State University campus (currently consolidated with Georgia Southern University), borrowed facilities' golf cart, and created their own bookmobile to support their campus's celebration of National Library Outreach Day (p. 20). The Lane Library librarians ran with the idea to create a bookmobile after librarian Kristi Smith attended a local brainstorming session during National Library Week; it was here that she first received the suggestion to use a golf cart as a bookmobile (Smith, 2017, p. 20). Smith (2017) stated that the fun, luau themed atmosphere was enjoyed by those who utilized the bookmobile, and the librarians checked out 15 items throughout the day (p. 20). Outreach like this helps students, staff, and faculty view librarians as out-of-the-box thinkers who are willing to get out of their comfort zones to provide services and resources that may otherwise be missed. It also outwardly displays a sense of caring and an acknowledgement of varying situations; this was similarly evident in the early 1900s when bookmobiles first began travelling the state.

Libraries will always evolve their practices and methods for providing information based on the

advancements of the day, but they will also re-use and tweak practices that worked in the past, and still work, to provide access. Some people in the early 1900s struggled with access to library materials for reasons such as distance from a library, lack of transportation, or racial inequality. With the advancement of technology and the wide usage of the Internet and smart phones, it doesn't seem likely that people today aren't able to access books or other resources. However, not everyone is fortunate enough to have access to the Internet, or they may have access but have difficulty using it. Additionally, their transportation may not be reliable or

accessible, or there may even be safety concerns in walking to their local library. The early 20th century problem of limited library access is still relevant today, and the bookmobiles highlighted in this article show the current need for resources provided by libraries. People are still interested in obtaining access to these resources, and the passage of time has not changed this fact. Libraries and the services they provide continue to be an important part of communities.

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