Changing Patterns of Library Service

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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO the peddler of household supplies was a familiar sight in many rural areas of this country. His small horse-drawn wagon, loaded with useful articles, served a very important purpose in those days. Today, within reach of nearly all of these rural areas, and sprinkled generously in the suburban communities, one will find vast glass-enclosed emporia housing every conceivable food and household article.

These buildings stand out from a very great distance because of the miles of long white fluorescent lights. The resulting brilliantly lit interiors are plainly distinguishable and the passerby is able to identify many of the commodities without entering the building. Perhaps this new merchandising plan is made necessary by the huge number of items which are now desirable in every household; perhaps it is even more related to the invention of gas-propelled vehicles which can be had in one or more versions by every family in the land.

There is a relationship in this merchandise change to the distribution of books and library materials. These new ideas have been accepted in some library systems where the constant mobility of the individual has led to a change in library facilities. Branch libraries can be separated by a greater distance. In the creation of fewer agencies each agency can be stronger. Certain cities such as Los Angeles and Detroit which emphasize automobile use have been influenced by this mobility in the location and development of new branches. Old standards of distance or frequency and size can no longer be acceptable in such a situation.

Any comparison of library service to these merchandising developments must be considered in relation to the basic change in population that has occurred since 1941. This country has seen a remarkable movement of people from rural areas to cities and suburbs. New high totals for the number of residents in cities have just been reported in [291]
the census. Cities have also grown in geographical area by large annexations of surrounding land. Encircling older cities are many newly organized and rapidly expanding peripheral communities classified under the confusing heading of "suburbia." The task of cities today is to provide services, streets, protection, and orderly development in these new areas and for greater numbers of people. At the same time and as a consequence of this population migration to metropolitan centers there has been a loss in population in rural areas, and the difficulty of providing services considered necessary has increased.

Units of government, utilities, and business, even religious denominations are faced with keeping pace with the demands from these expanding, or changing new areas. Librarians in the search for immediate answers to service needs in such a situation have relied on a well-proven device, the mobile unit. Therein lies the danger. If the nature of mobile service is understood as temporary and incomplete, then such service can help fill the lag that is bound to occur in serving these new communities and sparsely settled rural areas. But at best a temporary or supplementary service, the bookmobile cannot meet the standards librarians have promoted.

Before looking at bookmobile functions some consideration should be given to extension services generally. For one thing we may well question whether readers can use effectively the many small branches and stations which have been sprinkled so liberally through our cities in recent times. Is it not true that the variety of requests received from readers and the many possible books on a subject which one may expect in these branches makes it impossible to render a respectable service in units having limited hours, limited staff, and only a sampling of adult and children's books? If such a question is asked about permanent branches and stations, it is likely that an even more serious question may be asked about the smaller unit on wheels. Even the largest of these can carry only a small representative stock of books and other materials to people who do not have ready access to permanently placed units. What is more they lack the many facilities which even the smallest branch attempts to provide—reference materials, tables for readers, and a fairly wide range of carefully chosen representative books on many subjects and in varying degrees of specialization. One might also question the infrequent days each month that a mobile unit is available.

In raising such questions attention first must be directed to the problems created by the recent population change already mentioned.
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The public library, like other governmental agencies and public service companies, is profoundly affected by the changes of the postwar period. The relocation of a major portion of the population into newly developed areas has for the most part reduced the income available for public services while at the same time libraries and other governmental agencies have been required to assist in the process of changing cornfields to mature, completely equipped residential areas. Most of these new residential sections are lacking a real tax base with which to support services of government. The suburban development which has drawn around itself a neat political boundary and included no substantial amount of industrial or business property has found it almost impossible to finance schools, streets, water systems, and public libraries. When additional areas have been acquired by annexation, the tax base has been more substantial, but a recurring rise in costs offsets the larger tax base.

The absence of adequate financial support is not the only program in the provision of services to new neighborhoods. Certainly the shortage of personnel has made it difficult to staff agencies such as those maintained by a public library. The time required for planning and erecting buildings further delays the development of schools and libraries. The demands are always several years ahead of accomplishment.

When public libraries, either new or existing, plan the extension of services to these new areas, these factors of inadequate finance and absence of buildings and staff complicate a situation already difficult because of the remoteness of many of these neighborhoods and the pressure of demand for library service immediately. In the newly formed regional libraries, many of which lack an older city library as a nucleus, the same pressures exist for the immediate installation of more or less permanent agencies. But library boards do not have the necessary capital and operating funds and they have been forced to move very slowly in providing new branches. The rapid growth of the population in these new areas and the immediate demand for service therefore has led to many innovations.

Among these has been new adaptations of the traditional use of book collections in schools. Some libraries as at Nashville and other cities have tried the grocery chain-store shelf collection. Others have turned to a reliance on the bookmobile without building any branches. Such was the decision at St. Louis County in Missouri accomplished through the development of a book distribution plan built around a
most carefully conceived fleet of general and specialized bookmobiles. While these innovations made books available temporarily, more basic plans were being prepared. Surveys have been made for individual cities and regions which directed attention to the need for new branches and, at the same time outlined the criteria for providing these more substantial units of service. These surveys were necessary to prevent piecemeal action or concession to local pressure groups. The Dallas, Texas, survey by L. A. Martin is an excellent example of this approach. What is more interesting, this report shows what has happened to many American cities. The resulting plan, in brief, calls for adequate branches in the old city, and at the same time a circle of branches in the new portion of Dallas which completely rings the original city. The map which indicates the location of these branches illustrates the growth of Dallas and the difficulty of expanding the original library system to serve so much additional territory.

In passing it is worth noting the frequency in these surveys, of descriptions of still usable branch buildings which can no longer function because the neighborhood has changed. Certainly the need for facilities to supply books to readers of all ages is great. There is always the temptation to reach a quick solution but which, nearly always, is inadequate. The provision of small, if ineffective, branches meets the demands of pressure groups. On the other hand, if some more temporary method can be introduced, time can be gained for securing adequate funds and the development of a sound plan. In such cases the bookmobile is perhaps the only solution to this temporary need.

For over sixty years some form of mobile unit has been on the scene. Whether horse-drawn or gas-propelled, it has made books available but more urgent now is the provision of books in quantity and variety. The inadequacy of the bookmobile for any long term use in a given neighborhood as a center for reading guidance and reference is obvious. It may be that the very inadequacies of bookmobile service have been responsible for so many counties deciding that the public library was not worth the added tax. For example the librarians in Pittsburgh and Allegheny county report that:

In one important aspect, the bookmobiles are not producing the desired results. Bookmobiles can be nothing more than book distributors; they can, of course, have no facilities for reference, study or the various other activities which comprise full library service.

It was hoped that the more populous communities would become
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dissatisfied with the bookmobiles, and establish local libraries of their own. Efforts to do so have been made in a few suburban areas, but so far they have been defeated by the cost factor. One must no doubt recognize that these new communities must complete sewers, paving and schools before establishing libraries.¹

Putting it another way, the peddler's cart is gone; the super store is here.

References