Bookmobiles in the Libraries of Tomorrow

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Since the first bookmobile honked and wheezed through its backroads circuit in 1905,¹ the society in which libraries developed, along with the art of locomotion by gasoline-engined vehicles, has changed tremendously.

While libraries are by far the senior member of this particular combination of social needs and contrived satisfaction, the junior member has changed more rapidly. Mechanical developments in our society have come faster than the changes within libraries to match them. With respect to the bookmobile, its physical form has changed somewhat, but its basic service usefulness has not. Adjustment to it—or acceptance of it—has come a long way, however, with considerable evidence that there will be even more widespread use and availability of bookmobiles in the future.

Today’s bookmobile is a tribute to the combined interest and genius of librarian and vehicle designers and manufacturers. On one not-too-large unit is found a miniature collection of materials, minimum staff to service these, and a philosophy of service worthy of librarianship. True, the miniature collection is usually no more than that, even though other main resources stand ready to aid and round it out; the staff is not always as professionally capable as might be desired; and the general provision of service is limited both by the vehicle’s ability to move and the places it can go. The bookmobile is an adjunct and no more to the services of its parent institution; in fact, as an adjunct it may have its main raison d’être, going out of use as permanent service centers arise to replace partial facilities.

This sketchy rationale is what the field generally has said about bookmobiles and their place in present day library operations. But what is equally true is that librarians have not gone much beyond this level of thinking or operation to prove whether the thesis is...

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correct: that a bookmobile can be no more than an ancillary arm of the main institutions, serving as long as better agencies are not available. In the light of generally universal problems of physical plant renewal, fewer professionals for increased position needs, and no greater measure of support by the general population, is it possible that full library service through fixed centers will ever rise beyond a minimum attainment to the point where bookmobiles will not only be discarded, but never again necessary?

Costs for metropolitan areas alone are staggering in terms of what must and should be done for library buildings, budgets, and book collections. Admitting that inferior units (in details of operation, if not in concept) will hardly help librarians reach the level of importance needed to provide support for redoing the prime units, is it still possible to expect such renewal with any conceivable time period? What about the successful instigation of library services under the Library Services Act, which, if properly nourished, will demand for themselves additions and extensions whose total cost will be an equally staggering figure, separate from renewal or expansion of existing units? How should the idea of bookmobile—or any other extension—service be viewed for the library of the next decade or half-century in the light of such practical considerations?

It seems to this writer that there are three possibilities for future bookmobile use:

1. Perpetuation of current models and types, with some improvements in the size of book stock, handling and routing of the unit, and more attention to the maximum number of units for a specific operation;
2. Development of additional types and other vehicular units; and
3. Revision in part of the concept of permanent service centers.

Perpetuation of current ideas and models, with some improvements.—Some cities and counties have begun bookmobile use after considerable debate as to selection of the rolling stock: trailers, standard “one-piece” bookmobiles, or tractor-trailer bookmobiles. Most of the considerations involving such selection revolve around book capacity, purchase and maintenance costs, and maneuverability and flexibility. By and large, more single-unit bookmobiles are in operation than any other types for reasons of staffing, handling, legal restrictions of size on city streets, etc. An exception is Midland, Michigan, which had two trailers built to be moved by one panel truck serving as general
vehicle in addition to its hauling assignments. Most boards are convinced, however, that specially built vehicles for library use ought to be the one-unit bookmobile.

The maximum load for library service numbers around five thousand books, and only the largest trailer-tractors are capable of this number. Hence any mobile unit is at best a portion of a branch or extension collection, and thus subject to criticism on the point of sufficiency of resources and potentialities. In addition to the limits of book stock, few libraries have put into service simultaneously more than one unit, usually waiting until one proves itself before adding additional ones. This practice has resulted in obvious difficulties of providing, at least according to any standards, even a minimum collection and service to new or changed areas within the library’s responsibilities. Where, perhaps, twenty-five thousand books are a minimum—requiring four to six bookmobiles—it is obvious that one unit put into service will hardly make up the difference.

Since a library could quickly spend $100,000 for five bookmobiles of adequate size and with proper equipment, it is easy to understand the difficulties which librarians have faced in their attempt to spread their institutions throughout many service areas. While $100,000 will buy very little in the way of permanent building these days, probably the psychological difference between conceiving of a permanent fixture versus a moving one has been a strong part of the decisions made about expansion of library services. Yet it is virtually impossible to concede that bookmobile service, unless instituted with the same concern as branch service, will be satisfactory in either revamping old ideas or filling in the gaps made necessary by the growth of service areas. What is needed are bold gestures in the direction of sufficiency in providing accepted models and services.

If library X, currently considering its service needs, contemplates bookmobile usage, it should set up an experimental formula which equates fixed unit services with the restrictions of mobile operations. It must realize that one bookmobile does not equal several branches (or stations or any other lesser unit) for the very simple reason that one bookmobile cannot be in more than one place at the same time. Routing schedules alone should remind administrators and trustees that, while bookmobiles are extremely valuable, one vehicle cannot either carry or maintain the same service load as two or more fixed locations. Hence it follows that the inception of bookmobile service should allow for the number of vehicles which could be equal to two
or more fixed locations. The matter of a short stop versus a long one is in essence the same argument as that of how many hours the branches should be open to the public. With all the need and good will in the world, the public cannot use libraries if these are not open or not there when they want to enter and seek information. The fact that commercial enterprises are operated on schedules which are convenient to the patron (but not necessarily to the operator) should be a reminder that librarians must just as carefully calculate open times for maximum return on the huge investment of staff, stock, and service.

Another aspect should be pointed out here. If bookmobiles are conceived of as catering to the lighter needs of the public, then it is not so important whether they meet patron needs as to time, collections, etc. The patrons who appear at the door of the bookmobile at 10 a.m. to pick up a pair of mysteries or romances could conceivably be there at 2, 4, or 8 p.m. But if this is the bulk of service objectives assigned to the bookmobile, there are probably cheaper and more efficient ways to accomplish such limited requirements. It is hardly justifiable to spend $10,000-$20,000 (1960 prices) for a mobile unit to haul 50 per cent juveniles and 50 per cent light reading just to show that the library is “modern” in its approach.

A worthy and rewarding objective would be the supplying of a balanced print and non-print materials collection, limited though it must be, through the use of as many units as are needed to substitute for fixed locations. Improvements in staffing, to provide the best help rather than lesser quality, might be the first step. The idea that, since the bookmobile cannot service the reader very well anyhow, a personable and reasonably responsible staff member will suffice is only another expression of experimentation with the new toy rather than conviction about a totally new service. There would be less likelihood of such operations being conceived of as temporary or makeshift if bookmobiles were generally staffed by trained and experienced personnel. With the built-in limitations of book stock, it would appear that only a trained librarian would be capable of realizing the maximum potential from a minimum collection.

Additional improvements, such as better communications between mobile units and the main or other fixed service centers, would help impress the public with the idea that the new service is conscious of its shortcomings and is attempting to overcome them. Such a device as the citizens band radio-telephone could provide ready refer-
ence answers, ascertain whether books were available elsewhere, and even be used for readers advisor contacts. The investment is small in comparison with the potential return. No licenses are required of the operators; there would be no interference with other communications; and the library service in toto would be better coordinated through the use of such a simple addition.

An older, more vexing problem should be noted. Traditionally in most systems, branches do not have book titles which the main library lacks, possibly on the assumption that such collections would be too difficult to administer without some type of union catalog to provide all readers with equal opportunity and knowledge about the library’s resources. While this statement is obviously not binding on all library operations, it is true that few systems have attempted to build branch—hence bookmobile—collections on a different basis from the main building collection. Aside from the pertinent and accurate reminder that there are basic titles worthy of duplication in all the library’s service centers, since branches are not replicas of the central resource, why not build bookmobile collections from a different rationale? If bookmobile A, serving such and such areas, carries a collection built on the knowledge and needs of the people of these areas, why must bookmobile or branch B, C, etc. have the same titles and range of collection? Why not provide each unit with different kinds of collections, having some common elements (based on Standard Catalog, etc.) but with more differences than commonalities? Extensive use of quality paperbacks, careful selection of fringe titles, etc., could provide stimulating and expanding reading experiences for adults and children, with the possibility of finding out more than is now known about the likes and dislikes of readers. Inexpensive books can be hardy, easily added or deleted from collections, and might be the best way to capitalize on present output for fields in which libraries are normally weak. The problems of charging, etc., while not to be disdained, are only mechanical ones capable of being handled with the present knowledge and availability of mechanical devices. What is lacking is the desire to experiment with and evaluate such practices.

There is valid and valiant use to be made of bookmobiles, if attention is paid to the number required for a particular system, to the book stock and staff responsible for servicing these resources, and to the problems of adequate coverage within a particular system.

Development of additional or new types of mobile units.—Mention
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was made above of variations—rare in number—to be found among types of bookmobiles in general service. Still to be seen are panel trucks whose outside surfaces are hinged covers opening to reveal bookshelves inside. Not to be seen, at this writing at least, are any units developed specifically as a result of experimentation with the needs of bookmobile service. No system has yet built and used an articulated type (two units in tandem, with flexible passage or covered passway); no manufacturer has described anything like the Greyhound Scenicruiser (two-level passenger bus) adapted to bookmobile use. One very good reason why this is true is cost: bus companies can pay for and amortize their expensive units from public fares; libraries cannot. An expensive bookmobile would be in the range of $25,000–$28,000; a large motorbus might cost as much as $50,000. Another not-so-good reason might be the lack of desire to experiment with prototypes whose success cannot be guaranteed in advance. Whatever the reasons, no startling types have appeared different from those to be seen in any typical bookmobile operation.

One possible development which embodies existing types, but which calls for a new approach, might be the multiple-unit operation. Several large bookmobiles (33’–35’, 4,000 book capacity) could be internally arranged and stocked so as to provide far greater approximation to a branch library than is possible with one unit. One unit would carry a typical reference collection, with foldup tables and chairs; a second unit would be a children’s bookmobile; a third one, adult circulation and related services. The three units would travel together, and would be parked so that a patron could go from one to the other by passing through a covered walk (as in some city bus stops). The bookmobiles could be arranged as the library saw fit; the one constant would be the “fleet” idea which made sure that no stop received service from fewer than the three units.

The physical arrangement within each bookmobile would not be much different than typical units. It would probably be necessary to have an intercommunication system connecting all three units; the unit designated for reference work might need special care in allocating shelf space and arrangements; and more seating space would be provided in the other units. Think of the adequacy of such a fleet—carrying perhaps 13,000 items with a staff of three librarians and two or three driver/clerks—in comparison with a single bookmobile. The cost would be about tripled, but even with three such multiple fleets in operation, the total bill for library services would be far less than
the cost of two small branches, their staffs and collections. The flexibility of such an arrangement would be immeasurable in dollars, but unquestionably the ability of the units to supply an approximation of standard service would be more measurable in comparison with fixed unit services.

Improvements in materials used for boats, tents, etc., leads to some speculation about additional ideas for future bookmobile types. It is possible to build a large trailer-tractor which could contain facilities to be erected at the stop and detached from the unit itself. For example, a large “pop-up” type tent, erected for campers in five minutes (according to the ads) could be used for a small children’s corner, or for story hours, lectures, and even small group film showings or meetings. Other separate units could be set up quickly, connected by intercom to the main unit, and be serviced by staff members specially assigned for the location and time. Such facilities would not be overly expensive, and would help to compensate for space differences between mobile and fixed units. Many units now in operation have provided a canopy on one side of the bookmobile where story hours are held, or for other activities requiring more space than inside the unit. Some of the additional space requirements could be permanently placed—such as fiberglass rooms, aluminum sheds, etc.—and the bookmobile would park alongside them in such a position that it serves as the control center. While these suggestions raise many administrative problems, the writer does not feel they are insuperable. Climate, distances, and other factors would be prime determinants in the acceptance of such ideas for any particular library.

A third variation in form of vehicle might be mentioned. One of the main contributions of the recent A.L.A. Standards has been the emphasis on systems of library operations. Many of the present single libraries must be connected into some form of cohesive amalgamation in order to survive mounting costs, shifts in population, and a host of other problems. A great number of these small libraries are to be found around cities, or in close proximity to each other; many of them are on connecting railroad lines. America’s railroads today face financial burdens due to declining passenger incomes, and tremendous competition from trucking operations. Yet Railway Express Agencies exist at almost every “whistle stop,” and postal service is not denied any community. It is possible that a railway library car (or cars) could be developed which could, under the auspices of a system, supply better library service than is now available. (Several of these uses
are discussed in the previous chapter by S. H. Horrocks and J. A. Hargreaves.)

Such a unit (composed of one or more cars) could be moved to several locations a week—or for whatever period the system agrees upon. A minimum of three cars could provide the equivalent of a fairly adequate branch library, with provisions for the normal services to be expected from such a service center. The staff could be drawn from the local libraries which might be closed when the traveling unit appears. Costs of operation might be high in comparison with the single library within the area of operation; but the profession is generally agreed now, after surveys have so forcefully and unanimously made the point, that the inadequate library will never be able by itself to find a base of support capable of bringing it up to minimum standards of operation. The administrative problems conjured up by such a suggestion seem frightening; but so did those involved in the establishment of regional processing centers. Whether such an idea is practical is dependent on fixed railroad costs and the interests of the librarians in attempting to solve their service problems.

Revision in part of the concept of permanent service centers.—There are many libraries, either single building or multiple centers, which cannot hope to rebuild or relocate in the foreseeable future. These institutions are faced with the same problems as those which are able to add additional space, build new quarters, and adapt to the changes demanded of them. Possibly the only answer for the library without hope for additions is consideration of basic changes within its present space involving the addition of bookmobiles. Such libraries may have to think of bookmobiles as prime elements of their main service center rather than as extension agencies.

The transition to a truly public-service centered library from the traditional warehouse—or vault—indicated that most older buildings lacked adequate public service areas. Where space was available, in many instances it was vertical space rather than horizontal area. Many small cities spent a great deal of money to add space required to provide for growing library use, only to find that in two decades or so the additional investment in the physical plant was buried under the avalanche of new needs. Traditional library practices make it necessary that one building serve for all the needs involved in serving the public, including the utilization of space for internal needs which, while necessary, may deprive public service functions of valuable area. There are indeed few libraries which process their books or
favor their staffs with lounge facilities anywhere but in their own buildings. Business, on the other hand, has decentralized in many ways: separate buildings exist for offices, for accounting, for stock handling, for experimentation, etc. There seems to be little likelihood that most libraries are financially capable of or interested in following this pattern.

Bookmobile services may help provide an answer. Almost all—if not 100 per cent—of bookmobiles in use today are extension units, replacing branches or holding the fort in newly developed areas until such time as more permanent buildings will take over. Yet the same use of bookmobiles could be extended to cover the problems of those libraries which are faced with long term space difficulties. It is suggested that these libraries replan their present facilities to include only technical processing, reference and periodical collections, and staff recuperation areas. All other services will be assigned to bookmobiles. While this idea may be disturbing to those who conceive of library service as necessarily associated with a landmark or memorial, it offers a practical way out of the difficulty of a major expenditure for capital plant improvement. How else, for example, will some of the smaller buildings, now hopelessly bulging and in need of repairs, be replaced with modern, air-conditioned, attractive quarters?

Services need not suffer through such a move. The use of any type of mobile units, coupled together side by side or in any suitable manner, could provide far better and more flexible interiors than the old buildings. In addition, seating and traffic flow can be arranged for maximum efficiency and staff convenience, to say nothing of the patron’s benefit. The cost of such moves would be fractionally that of rebuilding, even though admittedly one conceives of such quarters as temporary. Is it just thinking or the actual longevity of the unit which has set the idea that mobiles are only expedients to be done away with when money is available for new buildings? So far as the life of such units is concerned, many bookmobiles are in their tenth or twelfth years of service; most of these have taken terrific punishment in travel over all sorts of roads, etc. Such units could reasonably be expected to last much longer if they were not driven thousands of miles over areas of varying demand on the chassis.

Another aspect of librarianship is also to be stressed. For the most part, technical services and processes are hidden (although still needful of large areas) from the public. One good reason they are so
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closely secreted, it is suggested here, is that most old buildings have forced these necessary operations into leftover areas, useless for public needs. Most of the library's public has no idea of the work done, its relation to the usual public services, or the kinds of experts who perform the tasks. Would it not be a valuable public relations asset to throw open these less-visited and publicized areas for patron inspection as well as for librarian pride in the nature of such organization? The outcomes of such “open houses” are hard to conceive; at the very least recruitment might be stimulated. If through reasonable expenditure of funds such quarters could be enlarged, brightened, and made visible, then it is possible that the larger portion of taxpayers who do not use the library might come to understand more quickly the professional nature of the services. No easier assault on the taxpayer’s pocketbook could be visualized than such space utilization. It, in turn, seems more possible through fixed bookmobile use than in any other way.

A matter of values is being debated here. If the librarian and library board feel that library service can be called such only when offered through the medium of a suitable edifice, then the suggestions above are out of bounds. But if library service is the bringing to people everywhere the resources, materially and professionally, which are necessary for the development of a mature population in this country, then the physical confines are not nearly so important as is the provision of service which guarantees a minimum level. So far as the public is concerned, it could be presumed that they will respond in kind to a new physical set-up which offers far more potentiality for their satisfactions than the old, unsafe, and unattractive quarters familiar to them from their childhood.

It should be stressed that this proposal has little to offer communities capable of carrying the burden of renewing or rehabilitating their library plants to meet the demands of the future decades of this century. Since most of the cities in this country are small, however, with decreasing ability to provide for essential services from property taxes, the library profession must help provide some practical and achievable answers to the problems of revitalization of library building and services. As long as the objectives of service are being met—or even approached—the matter of suitable buildings is possibly of secondary importance. Staff, material resources, the desire to expand the value of the library in the community for all ages and all people—these are the essentials which can take hold and grow in a metal
container as well as in a brick-and-mortar shell. If money were available for new buildings, etc., should no longer be the excuses for not improving the role of librarianship. Improvement can start now if the profession is interested in experimentation, leadership, and achievement.

References
