Introduction

HAROLD GOLDSFELD

THE EARLIEST BOOK WAGON went its uncertain way along the back roads of Washington County, Maryland, in 1905. Since then librarians in one way or another have been conscious of a challenge as well as a confusion in the use of mobile library service units. The challenge, of the type which Marshall Field, the great Chicago merchant, had in mind when he was presumed to have said: "Give the lady what she wants," is one as yet not fully answered some fifty-five years later. To some, bookmobile service is an attempt to bring the rudiments of basic library service to those who would not otherwise have it in their own localities. To others, the bookmobile is a good way to find out the interests and desires of people who have no fixed centers with regard to library service. To still another group, the use of bookmobiles is the only way in which to continue to serve their public in time of rising costs, limited potentialities for expansion, and confused geographical conditions.

The confusion about the role and value of bookmobiles is evident in the varied writings which comprise at best a meager literature. Some librarians, of institutions large and small, have a dim view of the logic implied in the use of these units by other librarians. Their opponents, on the other hand, seem to be reasonably sure that bookmobiles stir up interest, indicate directions for future consolidation or change, and are inclined to keep experimenting with moving branches. It is probably true that little evaluation has taken place—the results of which are available in print—of the value of bookmobiles in furthering library objectives, in actually stimulating doubtful areas, or in reassessing changing neighborhoods; yet it seems most improbable that today's administrators will either continue an existing service which may be doubtful, or begin such a venture without a great deal

Mr. Goldstein is Associate Professor, University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science.

[287]
of investigation about the nature of this aspect of public library operations.

This issue of Library Trends deals with some broad areas of concern in the field of bookmobile service, as well as with some of the specifics of operation. The initial chapter is concerned with a rationale for the use of bookmobiles: the ends and objectives proposed, the achievement of these, and the relationships of extension service to the entire institution. The second chapter describes quite specifically the ways in which one modern library system has combined a theory of operation and a service plan.

In a short piece on personnel the author presents a plea for better librarians in all libraries, emphasizing that those who will work in bookmobiles must combine the best factors of service and understanding. The next section pays attention to daily operations. The needs of the system must be considered in the librarian’s establishment of daily operational patterns. Specifics about service, policy, attitudes of staff and patron, and the handling of the unit itself are reviewed in some detail.

Following these statements by librarians there is a chapter on the selection of the mobile unit and other practical engineering aspects of the bookmobile as discussed by a leading sales engineer whose experience in working with librarians to establish some idea of criteria for the selection of a unit is evident in this material. Size, planning of the interior, equipment, and operating characteristics are a few of the items mentioned in some detail.

An unusual feature of the issue is the inclusion, for the first time in print, of the study of the economics of bookmobile operation. An American Library Association committee was charged with considering operating costs in 1955, and the results of their work are given by means of a complete chart of expenditures for 125 library operations during 1955-59. Librarians concerned with either justifying or computing the costs involved in mobile service will find herein a wealth of data for their use.

As a sort of conclusion to the practical concerns presented in the earlier chapter is a discussion of bookmobile publicity and public relations. The author presents ideas on the relation of publicity for one aspect of service with that of the total library effort.

A description of bookmobile operations in a number of countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia attests to the universal character of modern library development around the world. Finally, the concluding chapter presents some ideas for future bookmobile service.
Introduction

No attention has been paid to bookmobile use in college and university library operation for the very good reason that a cursory review of *Library Literature*, 1950-60, has not brought to light one article on such uses.

Mention was made in an earlier paragraph about the general lack of evaluative material on bookmobile service. From the standpoint of the librarian faced with starting operations, there is a body of data, mostly statistical, as to budget, schedules, and circulation results which he can find and use. From such data either the librarian who has just become interested or the one who has used bookmobiles over a period of years can find evidence on which to base his own conclusion. But the fact that most material to date is statistical in nature seems to indicate that available literature on bookmobile service has not concerned itself greatly with problems of objectives, total system orientation and direction, or the interpretation of an additional library operation with respect to its role in a system.

There is also need for a review of limits in bookmobile service coverage. It can be presumed that there are systems whose bookmobile schedules and extension are poor because of inadequacies brought on through stretching, as it were, to the utmost the usefulness of mobile units. The same schedule and coverage, on the other hand, in different circumstances might be entirely adequate and natural. What are such limits? On what basis is evaluation made of a particular service to arrive at measures of adequacy or inadequacy?

There is very little in the literature about bookmobile collections *per se*. It might be assumed that rules of thumb and other practical knowledge have been the guiding themes for the putting together and servicing of the small collections generally representative of bookmobile service. In the enlargement and/or change of such collections, no doubt each library with bookmobile service has come to some conclusion about desirable practices and results. The problem for the entire field, however, is that of finding out what individual libraries have gained from their experiences with this problem. What do we know about reader satisfaction from the standpoint of bookmobile operations versus that of the system without such units? Are there ways in which to deal with specific readers' requests and problems which are unique for bookmobile service, but about which the field in general is not informed? Is there anywhere experimentation with reader satisfaction to help overcome whatever problems arise from the use of a mobile unit with limited resources?

The reader will find allusions to general problems of coordination
between bookmobiles and fixed service units. There is great need for a cogent review of logical and philosophical statements about library extension service, from which librarians can draw their own conclusions in terms of their own needs.

It is hoped that future writings on the problem of mobile library service will help provide answers to the questions above, and in so doing raise many other fundamental problems of concern to all inquiring, progressive, and interested librarians.