

Hello. My name is Wayne Onkst and I am the recently retired State Librarian from Kentucky. It is a privilege for me to make this presentation to a group of practitioners who provide extraordinary library services every day across the country. Early in my career, I had the special opportunity to drive a bookmobile and also to deliver materials to people who were physically unable to visit their libraries. I believe it was in those situations that I learned truly what library service meant – especially for those who were unable to access the service themselves. Later, I was also involved in developing outreach services for pre-schoolers of families who were not library users. One of the highlights of my career was launching the Read Racer, which brought books and programming to pre-schoolers just across the Ohio River in Covington, Kentucky. So I know of the value of the services you provide for your community and I salute you for the outstanding work you do every day.

The story I will be telling today is important for everyone and I think it will be especially beneficial for those who provide outreach service. As you provide outreach service – like any service – it is important to understand the historical context. In order to fully appreciate the journey, we must understand where we have been.

By providing bookmobile and other outreach services every day, you are part of a long tradition of bringing library services to the underserved. In fact, both here in Kentucky and across the country, the foundation of the library service we enjoy today is largely based on outreach services provided in the previous century.

It is also wise for us to take a look back periodically because as you provide service each day you are standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before. They have paved the way for us – and overcome many obstacles so we can do our work each day. For the next few minutes we will be talking about those folks who preceded us – those who laid the groundwork and fought for the service that we now enjoy. We can certainly learn from our predecessors and we need to appreciate their journey.

I don't have to tell you that providing outreach service is considerably rewarding, but it also brings challenges. Everyone listening to me today can tell their own special stories about the services you have provided. It is because I have shared the journey with you and I understand the importance of your service, that this story means so much to me – and I think it will be just as meaningful to you.

The story you will be hearing today will focus on 2 separate but related projects: first, the work of the pack horse librarians and secondly, the largest single bookmobile project in the nation's history. While both of these efforts took place here in Kentucky, they mirror efforts that have happened in other areas of the country. They show the obstacles faced by outreach librarians and how those obstacles were overcome. They also demonstrate how outreach efforts are the foundation of all library services offered to the nation today.

As Americans entered the modern age at the beginning of the twentieth century, library services were very limited. Only in urban settings and scattered rural areas was library service available even on a limited basis and often this service was not free, but fee based with some type of membership fee required. In rural and remote areas, the difficulty of sustaining life and the lack of resources for anything but basics meant that books were a luxury only few could afford. Educational opportunities were especially limited. This was particularly true in Appalachia.

Our story begins in 1887 when a Sunday school class in a Louisville, Kentucky church heavily focused on mission work in Appalachia undertook a project of providing books to remote mountain areas. Class members packed 50 used books into a wooden box which was sent to a mountain community. These people were our predecessors as they saw a need – and they looked for a way to fill the need, much like we do in providing library services today. The books were so well received, that the Sunday School teacher took the project to her Woman’s Club which readily joined in. More boxes of books were created. Seven years later in 1894, ladies representing 16 women’s clubs across Kentucky organized as the state federation of women’s clubs. Their very first project was to institute dues of 10 cents per member for the purpose of establishing traveling libraries for Appalachian communities. Following the model that had been successful, 55 books were packed in sturdy wooden crates. Now, we were not talking about a group of typical housewives. The club ladies managing this project included very well connected women who knew how to get things done. They convinced the Louisville & Nashville Railroad to ship the crates at no cost to the end of the rail lines in eastern Kentucky. From that point the crates were carried by wagon, boat, or muleback to one room schools, stores, churches, post offices, and other central locations where a local resident would agree to be responsible for taking care of the shipment. Residents would borrow books. For those who couldn’t read, sessions were held with public readings so everyone could listen and benefit. The collection remained at the location for 3 months, but at the request of readers this was extended to 6 months before the books were crated and sent to the next community on the circuit. In many communities these were the only books available other than the Bible and a few old textbooks used in the one room schools of that day.

Obviously there were no public libraries in this area. And in fact, few public libraries had been created anywhere in Kentucky except for a few major cities. These same women who initiated the book project began to lobby the state legislature for support for library development. These were our first library advocates and they are great examples for all of us. They were women of status, well connected socially and politically – not easy to deny. When they visited the Governor and their legislators they carried influence. They were successful in 1910 in having the state legislature create the Kentucky Library Commission to help communities establish libraries and also specifically to further develop the traveling library program. The traveling libraries project moved from the women’s club to a state sponsored effort. The state provided some funds to add books to the traveling libraries, but not very much.

Over the next 20 years – from 1910 until 1930, the traveling libraries project continued to bring books to eastern Kentucky. Through the combined efforts of women’s clubs and small appropriations from the state legislature, more books were added and the project reached further into the isolated Appalachian mountains. You can only imagine what these books meant for the print deprived areas of eastern Kentucky. Probably everyone hearing this has experienced the joy that books print to people – especially those who have no other access. I think this is what makes outreach service so special. Well here in the isolated mountain areas, there was very little access to the outside world. No radio – no tv – not even any newspapers. Much of the population was illiterate. What treasures these books were!

Unfortunately with the great depression that began in 1929, the traveling libraries program along with so many other things – came crashing down. State funding for libraries – which had never been very good – was slashed by 40% - and the economic situation limited resources available from the women’s clubs and any other sources.

But in the midst of the economic disaster that shook the country and devastated so many people, a very special library outreach effort was born.

The Roosevelt Administration undertook many projects to deal with the Great Depression. With unemployment at record levels, the Federal Works Progress Administration looked for ways to put people to work. We can still see work accomplished through the WPA – roads, schools, courthouses, gymnasiums, parks. There were many jobs that needed manual labor provided by men. But unemployment among women was also high and many families were supported by women. So the Federal Government created jobs promoting social and cultural awareness – jobs that could be accomplished by women. Women were paid were paid to take books into rural areas across the country.

In Kentucky, because of the topography and the isolated conditions in the eastern part of the state, taking books to rural areas required an innovative solution. The project was designed to visit people in their homes in addition to schools and other community locations but roads were few and there was no transportation system to deliver the materials. So the women used the only means of transportation available in mountain areas and they became known as the Pack Horse Librarians since they traveled primarily on horse back or mule back while a few also went by boat or on foot.

Headquarters were established at central locations staffed by a librarian who collected books and magazines and prepared them for distribution. The Federal government paid the salary – which was \$28 per month - and provided supplies and training, but all the materials to be distributed were donated. The pack horse librarian provided her own horse. If she didn't own a horse, she could rent one for 50 cents per day. The scarcity of books in Appalachia created particular problems for collecting materials. There was no pool from which to obtain donated books. Books were not available in homes – other than the bible. The state PTA organization established a Penny Fund, asking for a penny from each PTA member for purchasing books. These funds provided badly needed items, but the program never had nearly enough to meet the demand.

The pack horse librarians used suitcases, saddle bags, and string bags to carry books. Like the Traveling Library program, a small package of materials was brought to the deposit location. In two weeks, this package was picked up and taken to the next stop which might be a private home, a post office, school, church, or store. The ideal route was about 18 miles – which was covered in a day. The Pack Horse librarians spent 4 days on the road with the 5th day used for reporting and for cleaning and repairing materials in preparation for delivery.

The program began in 1935 during the darkest days of the Great Depression. You can imagine the value of the visits by these pack horse librarians. Every two weeks the pack horse librarian brought new materials – or at least materials that were new to the mountain families.

As many of you have learned, while providing outreach service it is necessary to know and respect the culture of the people being served. At first there was a reluctance by some mountain families to receive books for fear of what would be found in the books. But the pack horse librarians were able to eventually overcome all these concerns as they established relationships with the families. Some residents of the area considered the service a charity. Since they refused charity on principle, it was necessary for the families to provide something to the Pack Horse librarian in return for the service. This took the form of vegetables, canned goods, or sometimes a recipe.

Once again, just think for a moment about the impact. The books, magazines, pamphlets and other reading materials were anxiously awaited and heavily used. In addition to books, magazines were very popular as they brought the outside world into the isolated mountains. They also provided practical information that helped the users deal with daily living. Articles on agriculture, child care, hunting, household management, home health, and machinery were much anticipated. Children's books were much in demand, though few were available. It was not uncommon for the children in the household to read the books to their parents who were illiterate. Never before had information like this been so available to these people. Just imagine how they waited for the expected arrival of the pack horse librarian.

The materials were so heavily used that they fell apart. Since there was not much available to use for replacements, librarians used the loose pages to create scrapbooks that became part of the collections. Some of these scrapbooks were saved and can now be seen at the FDR Presidential library in Hyde Park, New York. Bookmarks were a novelty, so it was a practice to turn down the pages of materials, which further damaged them. The Pack Horse librarians came up with the idea of making book marks from old Christmas cards. The bookmarks became additional items of interest in the book shipments as many families had never before seen a Christmas card. In addition, families that sent and received Christmas cards collected them for the Pack Horse librarians to be used in making book marks.

The project was recognized as a success across the nation. Eleanor Roosevelt even visited Kentucky in 1937 to highlight the project and its success. By 1940, there were 182 pack horse librarians operating in eastern Kentucky. Unfortunately as World War II required more of the nation's resources, the project ended in 1943. But these women – and a few men left a lasting legacy. They provided the only library service for 30 counties or about ¼ of the state during the 1930s and early 1940s. Many mountain youngsters learned to read as a result of the materials they delivered and many mountain families dealt with the Great Depression in part with the materials they provided. The Pack Horse library project also led to the next major effort and the realization of library service across the mountains of eastern Kentucky.

The service provided by the Pack Horse librarians demonstrated the need for books and information and just as importantly, that the people were receptive to books and library service. Immediately after World War II ended, efforts began to restore and increase library service. The war brought many changes to the mountains. The world was different. More opportunities became available and more was expected. Men returning from service had higher expectations and they were open to new ideas and new ways of doing things.

There had already been preliminary efforts in bringing larger collections of books by vehicles where roads made it possible. Berea College became involved. Berea was a progressive college that catered to Appalachian students. The college had experimented in using what was probably the first motorized vehicle to deliver books. Yes, this was likely the first bookmobile in Kentucky. Just before World War II, the E. O. Robinson Mountain Fund obtained 2 panel trucks which they filled with books and drove to 2 mountain counties where roads permitted. When the War began, however, the 2 vehicles were needed for the war effort. But this work did not go unnoticed and the potential was obvious.

A member of the Friends of Kentucky Libraries – which had been established in 1936 as the Citizens Library League – Mrs. Mary Belnap Gray of Louisville became aware of this service. As soon as the war was over and trucks once again became available, she donated funds to purchase 6 vehicles if the state would agree to provide funding to operate them. Astonishingly, this approval was not easily obtained. But by 1948, the state used Mrs. Gray's gift to purchase an old army ambulance which became the state's first bookmobile. It was followed by a hearse, a jeep, and 3 small panel trucks as the first bookmobile fleet. Mrs. Gray named each one of the vehicles in honor of a family member. And the vehicles were referred to by their given names.

The vehicles were gathered at Eastern Kentucky University where they were loaded with books and the librarians were trained to operate the service. The cost of operating the service was \$15 per month in addition to the salary of the librarian which was \$45 per month.

The results were dramatic. The service went well and proved that bookmobiles were an effective and economical method of bringing library service to communities where none existed. Public library service in Kentucky and across the country in rural areas was sparse in the post war years. Studies indicated that Kentucky ranked 47th among the 48 states at that time in the number of library books available to its residents. One of the bookmobiles was taken on a tour of the state to show communities how the service worked and to encourage them to undertake their own projects.

The Friends of Kentucky Libraries held their annual meeting in 1952 in Louisville. The guest speaker was author Jesse Stuart – one of Kentucky's favorite literary sons – who reported that 80% of rural Kentucky had no library service and 47 of our counties had no access to library books – folks, this was just 64 years ago!

In the audience was a Louisville Department store executive Harry Schacter. Mr. Schacter later said that as he listened to Mr. Stuart, he was moved by a photo of children standing in front of one of the bookmobiles eagerly waiting for books. He immediately developed an ambitious plan – which some thought was fantasy – for putting bookmobiles in every county.

His plan was to:

1. Buy 100 bookmobiles at a cost of \$3,000 each. Most of the money would be raised locally with some funds being raised statewide from corporations and individuals
2. Each county would be responsible for committing recurring funding to maintain the service – about \$3000 per year
3. The state would provide \$200,000 annually for the cost of new materials

In Feb. 1953 a meeting was held at the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville attended by 3 former governors and numerous prominent officials from across the state who gave their support. The Governor of Kentucky agreed to serve as honorary chair of the campaign. And in a huge coup – Mrs. Barry Bingham agreed to serve as chairman of the effort. She was the wife of the publisher of the Courier Journal – the state's largest newspaper and at the time one of the most influential in the nation. Mrs. Bingham worked tirelessly for the project and certainly deserves a large share of the credit for its success.

The campaign quickly received strong support from across the state. The school superintendent in a county where one of the bookmobiles was operating reported that students exposed to books on the bookmobile showed dramatic improvement in reading skills. For many families, the only books available

to them was the Bible and the Sears and Roebuck catalog. For these families, the bookmobile opened a whole new world.

Over the next 18 months, the bookmobile campaign captured the imagination of the state. Companies were given the option of having their names printed on the bookmobile they sponsored. Tobacco companies – of course tobacco was one of signature industries at that time – gave 19 bookmobiles. The Louisville Courier Journal gave 5. Finance Companies gave 4. Unions gave bookmobiles and some families provided money in memory of relatives. Even though bourbon was another of Kentucky's signature industries, money was not sought from whiskey companies in fear it would bring controversy from tee-totalers. In support of the campaign, one of the state's prominent horse racing stables named a colt "Bookmobile" and had the name officially registered with the jockey club.

While funds were being raised to purchase bookmobiles, funding was also being sought for materials. The Association of Theater Owners agreed to show a special motion picture in every theater in the state on a selected date and charge and admission price of 2 books. About 600,000 books were collected as a result. Volunteers sorted through this mass and brought them to a warehouse in the state capital where they were processed and organized.

The biggest hurdle was obtaining funding from the state. The state legislature met in 1954. The state's finances were in a downward cycle. The coal industry was in a recession and a drought had reduced farm income. There was even a decline in the amount of whiskey taxes into the state coffers. In spite of this tough budget, the legislature was convinced to provide the \$200,000 needed for books.

As the fundraising goal was in sight, a committee sought bids from across the country for the building of the bookmobiles. The successful bidder was the Gerstenslager Company in Wooster, Ohio. Jaycees traveled to Wooster to get the bookmobiles and drive them back to Frankfort where they could be loaded with materials. National Guardsmen then drove the bookmobiles from Frankfort to Louisville for distribution.

One of the largest tasks was loading all the materials into the new bookmobiles. An assembly line type of process was organized. Diagrams of the interior of the bookmobiles were posted in the warehouse where the materials had been processed and stored. Books for each bookmobile were loaded into cartons resembling the bookmobile shelving. As each bookmobile was driven to the warehouse, the books were ready for loading on the bookmobile.

On Sept. 16, 1954, the state saw an invasion unlike anything since General Bragg had invaded Kentucky from the south with his Confederate Army in 1863. Fortunately Bragg's invasion was unsuccessful. But the 1954 invasion made a lasting impact on the state. In a parade that covered 4/5 of a mile, 84 bookmobiles traveled through downtown Louisville. Planes flew overhead, people watched from upper story windows, and flags flew in the breeze. The bookmobiles paraded to the Kentucky State Fairgrounds where they were met by the Governor and representatives of 84 counties anxiously awaiting their bookmobiles. The welcoming party included the executive director of the American Library Association and a local priest who blessed the fleet. 11 more bookmobiles were purchased over the next year bringing the total of the project to 95. Suddenly Kentucky had the largest bookmobile fleet in the country and the nation's best outreach program for library services.

While I would like to say that all was easy from this point, there were issues:

1. Roads in some counties were not suitable for travel to remote locations.

2. Each bookmobile had about 1000 titles. These were quickly checked out. So limits were imposed to keep materials available for all.
3. Some counties had difficulty keeping their commitment to support the bookmobile with operating funds
4. Training of librarians was an issue. Annual workshops were held, but with new staff training was difficult

Overall, however, the success was enormous. The first month of service saw 95,000 users with 150,000 users during the second month. Lines of anxious readers were reported at stops awaiting arrival of the bookmobile. During their first year of operation, the bookmobiles circulated 2.6 million items, and then more than 3.5 million items during the second year.

Considering the campaign lasted only 18 months, it was enormously successful. One librarian from eastern Kentucky wrote a letter of thanks to the committee that oversaw the effort: "If you people who worked so hard on this could see the hands in these mountains reaching for those nice books, you would feel that your labors were well worth it. They beg us to come to them. I hope you can visit us sometime and see how hungrily they reach for these books."

Not only did the bookmobiles bring library service to unserved areas, but they also resulted in new libraries being established. With the success of the service, it was no coincidence that 14 new public libraries were established in Kentucky in 1954 alone. Almost every public library in the state can trace its origin to this bookmobile project.

There was also significance of this project nationwide. A teacher in a Knott County school – located on one of Kentucky's poorest and most isolated counties – had appreciated the services of a pack horse librarian in his one room school. The teacher's name was Carl Perkins. Mr. Perkins got involved in politics and eventually became the Congressman from the eastern Kentucky district. He saw the bookmobile project and was convinced that federal funding was need to help support the bookmobiles and also to assist in library development. In 1956 as the bookmobiles flourished, Congressman Perkins sponsored the first Library Services Act which provided the first federal funding for libraries. I think it is safe to say that Kentucky's bookmobiles played a large role in obtaining federal funding for libraries for the nation. For the next 28 years until his death, Congressman Perkins was a staunch supporter of libraries in Congress.

I hope you have enjoyed the story of the Kentucky Pack horse librarians and the great bookmobile project.

Now this is where my part of the story ends, but it is really where your story begins.

Providing outreach service for your community puts you in a crucial role in your library. Only by serving those who would otherwise be unable to obtain service can a library be truly successful and meet the community's needs.

Unlike many other positions in the library, you have a lot of control over the service and how you will provide it. You also have the opportunity to develop a special relationship with your users. You will certainly have the opportunity to impact your users positively for the future. You can never really know

how your service might impact a user. You are looking at a read poster of Frank X. Walker, Kentucky's poet laureate who was inspired as a youngster by his bookmobile librarian.

Good luck to you as you inspire people in your community.