Bookmobiles: Then and Now

Backstory

I’ve been working full time at a branch of the Indianapolis Public Library since 2007. Last November, I became a part time employee and joined the Outreach department. This enabled me to attend graduate school full time, still remain in my library system, and also take care of my three year old son. I had never worked in Outreach before, and I fell in love. I decided to make bookmobiles the topic of my final paper after reading about how so many bookmobiles have been taken out of service in our country. Some programs were ended due to budget cuts, and others were seen as obsolete with the advent of the internet and digital services bringing the library directly into people’s homes. I believe that bookmobiles are an essential component of public library service, are capable of providing far more service than they are given credit for, and are one of the best ways a library can advocate for and advertise itself. This timeline is intended as an introduction to the technology of the bookmobile, its rich history of service, and a look to future possibilities.

I believe this research is needed for three reasons:

1. It provides a source of inspiration for those libraries seeking new ways to serve their communities.

2. It provides evidence of the importance of the bookmobile in its various iterations for any library facing criticism or possible defunding of their bookmobiles.

I began this project in the compact shelving room of the Indianapolis Public Library. There I sat for hours on end, digging through the records of the Outreach
Department. I will admit, I was completely overwhelmed. One item kept catching my eye; a photograph of children standing outside a van with the words “Go-Go Library Van” on the side. The picture was dated 1972. I wanted to know what that van did, because I knew there were also three bookmobiles at that time. What was the van’s purpose? As I began to look through the project records, progress reports, and newspaper clippings, I found an article about Indianapolis’ Traveling Branch with the brand new “photocharger” not found anywhere else in the library system. Then I was inspired. There is a great deal of technology on bookmobiles, and there are all different types of mobile libraries. Librarians have been hitting the road for over one hundred years, bringing books and technology to those unable to get to the library. What a wonderful legacy! Does anyone even know about it?

The biggest strength of my research is the wealth of primary source material. Working in the Outreach department gave me access to records I may not have known about otherwise. Being a staff member, I was able to gain access to compact shelving, where the historical documents are kept, instead of relying on a librarian to compile information for me. I was able to read a wide range of materials before narrowing my topic.

These primary sources also contain limitations. Richard Krzys (2003) suggests that records must be judged in terms of authenticity, genuineness, and accuracy. Physical examination leads me to believe the sources are authentic, though my eye is untrained. The fact that they are located within the historical documentation of the library itself leads me to believe they are genuine, as I trust the expertise of my trained librarian colleagues. Accuracy is the weakest of the three in my case. While there was
nothing that jumped out as contradictory within the documentation I researched, I wasn't always able to corroborate the information with other sources. Occasionally I would find reference to a program or image in one of the published library history books, but not always. I don't believe any data I used is inaccurate. As for the sources I used that are not primary, I did my utmost to keep to articles published in reputable journals and published library history books.

http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/641678/Bookmobiles-Then-and-Now/
References


Available: http://books.google.com/books?id=Sqr-_3FBYiYC&pg=PA1621


