Early Calloway County Connections Between WPA Road Projects and the Bookmobile

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Abstract

In the late 1930s, the Works Progress Administration opened an office in Murray to concentrate on the construction of county roads and city streets, along with other regional projects. In east Kentucky, the WPA helped to fund the Pack Horse Library Project, which employed women to deliver books and other reading material to remote mountain schools and residences. This effort launched a greater interest in the concept of bookmobiles. The bookmobile was one of the social changes that brought benefits of townspeople to rural folks, although rural school and church libraries were evident before Calloway County's bookmobile started in 1948, perhaps earlier. Still, book delivery brought more opportunities to young county residents and expanded adult education because of the roads. This paper traces the development of the Calloway County bookmobile, exploring how the new roads funded under the WPA aided in the early popularity of the bookmobile in the county – and led to what is the library today. Yet, after the WPA, many parallels between the eastern and western parts of the commonwealth existed in terms of the fight for library services development.

Discussion

In 1937, the Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Works Projects Administration) opened an office in Murray, Kentucky, with a program to build concrete streets in parts of west Kentucky, many of which were durable. The WPA spent $70,000 in Calloway County (Jennings & Jennings, 1980), with the greater part of the funding used in county road and city street construction. These roads not only would enhance the infrastructure for commerce and local transportation, but they also would pave the way, so to speak, for the bookmobile and future library developments. Meanwhile, in east Kentucky, the WPA helped to fund the Pack Horse Library Project, which employed women to deliver books and other reading material to remote mountain schools and residences. This effort launched a greater interest in the concept of bookmobiles.

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Few primary and secondary sources were available for this project. In fact, local library records of decades past were not kept, and any history of Calloway County's bookmobile was not preserved. Nevertheless, this paper traces the development of the Calloway County bookmobile and library services, arguing how the new roads funded under

the WPA aided in the early popularity of the bookmobile in the county – and led to what is the library today. Yet, it also uncovers striking and unfortunate parallels between the eastern and western portions of the commonwealth in the years after the WPA, notably the lack of funding support for library developments.

The fight against illiteracy in Calloway County

Libraries, public or academic, and education go hand in hand. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss what education was like in the years leading up to Calloway County's bookmobile and library services.

Free and available public schools have been a reality in this part of the state since the start of the 20th century. As early as 1900, a grammar school and high school education were available for those who had the means and transportation (Jennings & Jennings, 1980). By 1910, 72 percent, or 5,009, of school children ages 6 to 20 years were enrolled in school (Jennings & Jennings, 1980). However, this number might reflect children enrolled for one day. Many adults attended a few classes for reading, writing and arithmetic during the cooler months of autumn.

In 1914, Calloway County introduced a concept known as the moonlight school, which existed in cooperation with the statewide campaign to eliminate illiteracy in the commonwealth. Temple Hill and Hazel had two of the early moonlight schools, and others followed quickly (Jennings & Jennings, 1980). However, the effect was less than a moderate success in the county. A significant

reason could be attributed to tobacco farming, which showed prosperous returns. Calloway County in 1916 had 80 one-room rural schools.

The fight to wipe out illiteracy in the county resurfaced in early 1918 when Lois Waterfield was appointed by the state to lead an organized effort to teach every man, woman and child the art of reading and writing. This drive essentially was a follow-up of the previous moonlight schools. Then, on July 1 of that year, the goal was met. The county "was classified illiteracy free" so far as humanly possible (Jennings & Jennings, 1980, p. 229). Still, despite this reported attainment, illiteracy remained a constant concern in Kentucky. Across the state in 1930, 6.6 percent of Kentucky's population was considered illiterate compared with 8.7 percent in Virginia, 7.2 percent in Tennessee, and 10 percent in North Carolina (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930). Balanced to the rest of the state, eastern Kentucky counties experienced somewhat higher illiteracy rates ranging from 6.5 percent to 13.9 percent, while the rest of the state ranged from 1.1 percent to 8.3 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1930).

Early library attempts

The Male and Female Institute in Calloway County was built in 1871 and opened a year later. A factor in the county's growth, the school also had a small library in the northwest room of the building for students. However, as for any kind of a public library, Murray Baptist Church maintained what is believed to be the county's first public library with more than 700 books (Jennings & Jennings, 1980).

The first of many attempts to build a public library in Calloway County surfaced in the early 1900s. The Carnegie Foundation offered to finance $5 for every $1 invested by the county in providing grounds and moderate sustaining tax for a new city and county library. Unfortunately, the proposal failed to gain any support. (Jennings & Jennings, 1980).

It would be several years until additional proposals for a library are introduced, and those will be explained in more detail later. In the interim, the Depression years halted the nation's progress, economically speaking, until the New Deal era ushered in new projects. The number of schools in the county also declined. During the Depression, there were 54 one-room schools and 12 two-room school houses in Calloway County.

After World War I, rapid technological change affected the United States. Paved highways began to replace dirt and gravel roads, and automobiles began to replace horses and wagons as primary means of transportation. As Kentucky historian George Blakey (1986, p. 5) has written, "By almost every criterion Kentucky trailed the rest of the nation in the frenzied growth of the late 1920s."

Kentucky lagged behind in electrical power and paved roads, both of which were crucial to industrial development. However, in the central and western regions of the commonwealth, most economic progress and industry developed. The Works Progress Administration would change the face of literacy, libraries and the nation.

WPA and library service

To stimulate the economy and improve community infrastructure after the Depression, President Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (later renamed the Works Projects Administration) on May 6, 1935, with Executive Order No. 7034, under authority of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935 (Federal Works Agency, 1946). The WPA was the largest and most diverse of the New Deal public works programs. It was created to alleviate the mass unemployment of the Great Depression, and, by the time it was terminated in 1943, the WPA had put 8.5 million Americans back to work (Federal Works Agency, 1946).

Across the nation, most of the WPA projects built infrastructure, such as bridges, airports, schools, parks and water lines. In addition, theater, music, and visual arts projects were funded, while other service programs supported historic preservation, library collections, and social science research. The WPA also employed women in sewing rooms and school classrooms and cafeterias, and in the years leading up to war, it improved many military facilities.

In Kentucky, the WPA employed men to build roads, bridges, public buildings, and recreation areas. Public sanitation systems and running water began reaching many Kentucky towns and communities for the first time. Sewing projects employed women to make clothes for statewide distribution, and food projects employed women as dieticians, gardeners, and canners. Other Kentucky women collected oral histories, transcribed historical

documents, and worked in secretarial jobs.

Nationally, an inventory of WPA accomplishments in the *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43* includes 8,000 new or improved parks, 16,000 miles of new water lines, 650,000 miles of new or improved roads, the production of 382 million articles of clothing, and the serving of 1.2 billion school lunches (Howard, 1943).

Educational programs represented a facet of the WPA's larger campaign to improve society, and libraries played a key role in these programs. Administrators hoped that WPA library programs would help citizens improve themselves through reading and self-education (Schmitzer, 1998). Administrators also believed that library programs could increase literacy and, in turn, lead to greater understanding and appreciation of democratic culture (Blayney, 1977). A literate society would lead to a more informed society willing to participate in democratic practices. To help achieve these goals, the WPA library projects expanded library service in two specific areas: adult education and rural extension (Schmitzer, 1998).

The administrative director of the WPA's Education Division reported that no other institution for adult education was more important than libraries (Maxwell, 1937). Learning would improve "the earning power, the living conditions, the health, and family life of millions," as well as strengthen homes and families through nutritional and consumer education, and child care education (Maxwell, 1937, p. 51). Library programs also meant to encourage people to "read things that will be

useful to them and that will help them to keep growing" (Maxwell, 1937, p. 54). Citizens needed "to understand the economic and political problems of our time, and the democratic way of meeting these"; however, "to act intelligently as citizens of democracy, they need access to reliable facts and opportunity for free, informed discussion" (Maxwell, 1937, p. 55). Libraries could help achieve such goals.

WPA and traveling libraries

With not more than 250 county libraries in the country ("WPA Travelling Libraries," 1937), library service in Kentucky was extremely poor, as 63 percent of residents in the commonwealth had no ready access to public library facilities, especially in the eastern mountains (Schmitzer, 1998). Kentucky's library expenditures in 1934 of 10 cents per capita was far below the annual standards set by the American Library Association of $1 per capita. Likewise, Kentucky libraries circulated only one book per capita compared to the ALA's standard of five to 10 books per capita in 1934.

Of the approximately 250 county libraries in the United States, 25 to 30 – many in east Kentucky – rendered direct personal book delivery service to people living in isolated areas not reached by hard-surfaced highways ("WPA Travelling Libraries," 1937). WPA dollars partially formed what came to be known as the Pack Horse Library Project in several east Kentucky counties, including Pike, Jackson, Knott, Harlan, Clay, Laurel, Leslie, Breathitt, Magoffin, Lee, Floyd and many others. The effort lasted from 1936 to 1943.

The idea behind pack horse libraries and other variations of distributing information for the public good via some kind of vehicle might have originated in the 1890s (Garber, n.d.). Women belonging to a progressive club in Kansas began shipping boxes of books by train, from the relatively cosmopolitan city of Topeka in eastern Kansas to the more rural, western parts of the state. Most historians believe the first American bookmobile was a horse-drawn wagon that started circulating books in 1905 in Washington County, Maryland (Garber, n.d.).

The Pack Horse Library Project provided work relief for local women and a few local men who carried books and library materials packed in saddlebags on horses and mules to mountain residents, schools, and communities. Because of the area's rugged topography, isolation, and difficult accessibility, library service could only be provided by horseback delivery. One of the most innovative, yet primitive approaches to library service, the pack horse delivery method made library service reality, providing the first public library service ever experienced. Residents embraced the project, enthusiastic to borrow books and magazines regularly (Schmitzer, 1998).

The WPA in Calloway County did not provide for a traveling library, but the early constructed and paved roads funded by the WPA did. In a Feb. 1, 2016, interview at her home in Murray, former American Red Cross director and Regional Library System library clerk Jean Blakenship recalled her early memories of whom she called "the book lady."

Blakenship, who turned 85 in March 2016, did not remember the name of the book lady, who drove once a month in a truck to the two-room schoolhouse she attended in the Coldwater community in 1937. A blacktop road existed at the time, allowing the book lady's truck to travel through rural parts of Calloway County.

Blakenship was about 10 years old and in the fourth grade. She said the book lady's monthly visits were a refreshing change from the textbooks she and her fellow students read at school.

"My eyes bugged out when I saw all the books that we could choose," she said. "Each child was permitted to go out to her truck and select a book. Nobody cared what book they selected. I was thrilled to death" (J. Blakenship, personal communication, Feb. 1, 2016).

At the school, Blakenship said a shelf was built, allowing children to store their library books until the book lady returned.

"We had about 30 to 35 books, a varied collection," she said (J. Blakenship, personal communication, Feb. 1, 2016).

The modern bookmobile

In 1939, after a federal government reorganization, the Works Progress Administration was renamed the Work Projects Administration and placed under the newly created Federal Works Agency. However, with the advent of World War II and the unemployed entering war production and the military, the WPA dissolved gradually. Official termination came on June 30, 1943, per a Dec. 4,

1942, presidential letter to the Federal Works Administrator, while the Second Deficiency Appropriation Act of July 13, 1943, established liquidation procedures.

With federal funding dried up, the Pack Horse Library Project did not last for long. State assistance also was nonexistent, despite attempts to change that. In 1948, the Library State Aid Bill was introduced in the General Assembly requesting state aid for public libraries, but it died in the Senate Rules Committee, leaving library service in Kentucky worse than it had been during the pack horse library years. When the bill was introduced, 52 counties in Kentucky had no library service of any kind, many located in eastern Kentucky. This left 62 percent of the population without library access (Schmitzer, 1998).

East Kentucky's Pack Horse Library Project revolutionized a modern concept of a traveling library delivery system, warmly known as the bookmobile. Thanks not only to combustible engines and the increased use of motor vehicles, the infrastructure created by WPA funding allowed easy travel in such vehicles. Investment in the highway system through the New Deal's massive public works projects made bookmobiles viable. As such, bookmobiles were part of the New Deal. By 1948, thanks to a highway system in west Kentucky, bookmobiles "extended opportunities to young scholars and for expanding adult education opportunities" (Jennings & Jennings, 1980, p. 319).

In the years after the New Deal, Jean Blakenship worked in the Regional Library System

headquartered in Murray. At this time, she was a library clerk, and the library supervised services for five counties in the region. During her employment, she witnessed the growth of the bookmobile in the 1960s.

"A lot of people were interested to get to the bookmobile," she said. "The bookmobile influenced more people than we'll ever know. It's hard to document the significance of it" (J. Blakenship, personal communication, Feb. 1, 2016).

By 1957, bookmobiles dominated much of the state. In Calloway County, Margaret Trevathan directed the bookmobile unit for several years. Unfortunately, the popularity of the bookmobile did not influence local governments to enhance library services with funding. Rather, local politicians offered little support, were reluctant to raise taxes and often were uninterested in library service.

Development of the public library

Aside from the scant political and financial support, the public demand for books and information encouraged the public library system in Calloway County to "set up shop" in August 1959 next door to the new county board of education headquarters at the corner of South Sixth and Maple streets (Jennings & Jennings, 1980, p. 408). "Although cramped for space for the bookmobile in the new location, it was a slight improvement for the public library despite the pinch for funds to sustain the operation" (Jennings & Jennings, 1980, p. 408).

However, in 1960, the county library faced financial troubles keeping afloat. United Way

directors allocated $1,000 to keep at least the bookmobile operating until July 1, 1960. At that time, the county school budget had doubled its budget in six years to $558,654, compared with $440,000 the previous year. This added revenue allowed the Calloway County school board to increase its allocation from $1,000 to $1,500 to the county library (Jennings & Jennings, 1980, p. 418).

Women's clubs in many communities assured library service, no matter how small. The Calloway County Woman's Club was no exception. On July 1, 1961, the organization secured the Regional Library rating, under the direction of the state library extension department, with its supplement appropriation of $30,000 when every dollar from local funds was matched with $2 by the state. This new status assured everyday library service and also evening hours.

However, in 1962, the regional library was placed on probation by the state library extension division the first days of January, perhaps in retribution for voters failing to endorse the library tax at the November 1961 election. Bookmobile and regional headquarters continued on a daily basis, though.

The lack of public support prevailed again in 1964, when a proposed public library tax of 10 cents per $100 of assessed valuation failed – 3,552 in opposition to 1,743 voters who supported it. By comparison, and ironically, Harlan County in east Kentucky was the only other county in the state at the time whose voters opted to have a library tax of 7 cents per $100 (Jennings & Jennings, 1980). Again,

in 1966, by a public referendum, Calloway County voters heavily rejected a proposed tax to build a modern library. As Jean Blakenship said, "The community wouldn't vote a tax, but they loved the library" (J. Blakenship, personal communication, Feb. 1, 2016).

The public library encountered a turning point in 1967. A new state statute allowing for a petition to be signed by more than the legal voters casting a ballot in the previous general election positioned the library for successful taxation at last. This petition was presented to Calloway County Fiscal Court, which eventually passed a tax by secret ballot. Calling for a tax of 3.5 cents per $100, the ordinance was enacted May 18, 1967 (Jennings & Jennings, 1980).

The library charted another course two years later. On April 12, 1969, the library board announced plans for an 8,000-square-foot, $200,000 building and grounds on Main Street between North Seventh and Eighth streets. Peck and Associates of Paducah designed the architectural plans for the building and Quality Construction of Benton was awarded the construction bid. A state grant of $10,995 and one-third of the cost from local taxation partially supplemented the budget (Jennings & Jennings, 1980). In 1970, the county's first credible library, which still stands today, opened.

Renovations started in 1975 to add office space, a 150-seat meeting room, a foyer and a larger parking lot. The work was completed in July 1976. In 2015, the Calloway County Public Library board of directors began reviewing plans to update

the facility, which houses more than 70,000 books and other items.

Conclusion

The WPA cultivated the early popularity of the bookmobile, directly more so in eastern Kentucky. In Calloway County, the WPA indirectly helped the bookmobile and the library to flourish. Yet, in the years after the WPA, libraries and bookmobiles throughout the commonwealth faced funding woes that challenged their existence. Although Kentucky's libraries have battled fiscal issues for decades, and will continue to do so, they have managed to cement their rich history and purpose in social and cultural contexts.

On a large scale, the historical study of bookmobiles raises attention to the many innovative ways that information can be distributed. Throughout the 20th century, libraries were among the first to harness technology to access and share information. Exploring the historical uses of bookmobiles can help today's digital enthusiasts better assess the limitations of the digital revolution. In other words, looking back more than a century ago can help scholars and library supporters track back and think about the digital age differently, dissecting issues of access and community.

The bookmobile is still in use today – and maintained in the same spirit carried by the early Pack Horse Library Project. In Calloway County, the public library offers the bookmobile – a 2008 Chevy HHR compact sport utility vehicle – as a mobile outreach service delivering books to 42 locations,

including daycares, retirement villages, assisted living communities, individual homes and other locations for patrons who cannot make it to the library. Additional outreach will be necessary to ensuring the bookmobile thrives for future generations, taking all kinds of literature to the streets.

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