Ohio Libraries

Ohio Scenes and Citizens

By Grace Goulder

Arrival of Portage County's Bookmobile Is Big Event for All the Kids, Large and Small

PORTAGE County bookmobile draws up at Mantua Village School. In the foreground is Mrs. James Clelland, head of the Hiram Public Library, who rides the book bus three days a week.

MRS. FRANK ALLISON (left), who doubles as driver and librarian, and Mrs. James Bristol take care of the young customers.

HERE comes the bookmobile!"

"Here comes the li-berry!"

Shouts like these go up regularly in all parts of Portage County heralding the arrival of a big green bus. Affectionately dubbed "Bessie, the Book Bus," it carries within its capacious interior thousands of books and three young women librarians, one of whom doubles as driver. Books are packed not only on the inside but also on shelves on outside walls, these covered in transit and opened during stops. Bessie is a bus that literally bulges with books.

This library on wheels is operated by the Public Library at Hiram, seat of Hiram College, and serves every township in Portage County. Except for three libraries, at Hiram, Kent and Ravenna, it supplies all of the county's library facilities. The bus is loaded each morning at Hiram, returns here each evening. (Hiram is southeast of Cleveland, the hilltop village where Routes 82 and 700 meet.) The bookmobile goes out five days a week, fair weather or foul. And there is plenty of foul. Often the bus must wait for a snowplow before venturing on country roads. Visits are at four-week intervals on a schedule rigidly observed. Last year Bessie traveled 10,000 miles.

All of the county's 25 schools are reached. The bus parks in schoolyards, props open its sides, drops its rear steps and is ready for the children who troop out joyfully to it. We caught up with the bus at Mantua School. There is also a Mantua Corners, a Mantua Center—this one is Mantua Village, north of Ravenna. Supt. R. E. Millhone was on hand, too. Boys and girls clamoring to get aboard to pick out their books seemed more eager than children ordinarily appear in libraries. Possibly because these books are available only once a month . . . I wonder.

Anyway, the children were most cordial in their greetings to Bessie's staff. Mrs. James Clelland, Hiram Public Library's head, was on the bus that day, and two assistants, Mrs. James Bristol and Mrs. Frank Allison, the latter also acting as driver. Mrs. John Stein of Hiram also frequently helps on the bus. Each librarian seemed to know the children by name, quite a feat, I thought, in view of the many they meet on their county-wide itinerary.

An equally warm welcome awaited the bus at an "adult" stop in Hiram Rapids, where we next saw the traveling library. This bucolic little settlement on the banks of the Cuyahoga River is less than 35 miles from Cleveland. It's a quiet place, away from traveled roads. The bookmobile parks here at the cemetery entrance.

People came with baskets full of books, which they refilled with others. One man, Robert Hill, picks 14 mystery stories each time. He figures that he can read that many between bookmobile visits. The library staff is careful to have new thrillers ready for him each time. Mrs. Richard Kieselbach, who lives across the road from the cemetery, brought some books left at her door by neighbors unable to meet the bus. She also sends out word when she sees the bus appearing down the road.

All sorts of places are utilized as auxiliary libraries. In Atwater books are left at Douthitt's jewelry store; in Garrettsville in the office of the Journal, the weekly newspaper, and near Ravenna in the ordnance plant. A substation in the vast housing project at Windham has a part-time librarian, Mrs. Eiveen Weiman. The bus makes other stops in private driveways, beside churches and grange halls, at crossroads—anywhere that is out of traffic, is a bit sheltered and an easy meeting place for two or three borrowers.

The traveling library has 7,100 registered readers. Books are the 21,000 volumes belonging to Hiram Public Library, of which the bookmobile is an integral part. The bookmobile accounts for 170,000 of the Hiram Library's annual 200,000 circulation. The bus operators will tell you they wish they had double the number of books and could make their rounds twice as often as they do. Apparently Portage County folks like to read, appreciate having their books delivered to them.

The book bus has been going about only since 1942. When Portage County plead for library service, neither Kent nor Ravenna Library felt it could undertake the job. Hiram Library volunteered. It had not been organized very long, knew what it was to want books. In 1936 Hiram citizens put on a local book drive, borrowed more from the state library, and, with volunteer help, opened the town's first library in a store. When the county service was begun, librarians carried books in canvas sacks in their own cars, visited nine schools. A few weeks ago Hiram Library bought its own building, a residence on Wakefield Street, Route 82. While the bookmobile moves up and down county roads, this library is open daily with these additional staff members: Miss Anna Laura Peckham, Mrs. Margaret Smith, Miss Edith Douglas and Mrs. Arthur Brown. Trustees managing the local and bus library are: E. R. DeHaven, president; Mrs. Leon Cook, vice-president; Mrs. G. A. Vincent, secretary-treasurer, and Mrs. L. E. Cannon, Miss Jessie J. Smith, Mrs. Arthur Ryder, Arthur H. Benedict and Ralph H. Goodale.

NEXT WEEK: Life Among the Amish.

CHILDREN clamber aboard the book bus at a stop in Mantua.

OHIO STATE LIBRARY

BESSIE the Book Bus stops at a cemetery entrance in Hiram Rapids, and readers come with baskets of books. Left to right: Mrs. Richard Kieselbach, Mrs. Theodore Brigham, Mrs. Leslie Lawrentz, and their children; Robert Hill, who borrows 14 books each time, and Mrs. James Clelland.