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## The Pack Horse Library Initiative and Kentucky's librarians in the Great Depression: An academic essay

### Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Stephanie Omer for her input.

# **The Pack Horse Library Initiative and Kentucky's librarians in the Great Depression: An academic essay**

By Jessica Omer (University of Missouri)

## **Introduction**

The history of libraries is a complex story of ups and downs. There have been times in American history when libraries almost ceased to exist (Boyd, 2009). One of those moments was during the American Great Depression of the 1930s. During this time, American institutions failed, jobs disappeared, homes were lost, and American libraries began to disappear. This paper aims to discover the Pack Horse Library Project's role in Kentucky history and its legacy. This paper answers two questions—How did The Pack Horse Library Project save libraries in Kentucky? And how did women save library services in eastern Kentucky?—by exploring different aspects of this topic, including the history of libraries in Kentucky during the Great Depression, The New Deal, the creation of the Works Progress Administration, the history of the Pack Horse Library Project, what role the program had on the development of libraries in Kentucky, and how the Pack Horse Library Project affected the role of women in the library.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Library Services in Kentucky Before and During the Great Depression***

The communities found in the eastern Kentucky mountain regions were isolated areas that have historically been left behind the rest of the nation (Swain, 1995). In the 1930s, the Appalachian Mountains region was virtually cut off from the rest of the world due to the lack of roads and inaccessible landscape (Boyd, 2007). Most library services at this time focused on urban areas, resulting in over 63% of residents being unable to access library services (Boyd, 2007). Martha Swain argues that this was due to the lack of a strong state library extension program, a fundamental weakness within the southern library systems (Swain, 1995). A study conducted in 1935 showed that the yearly library expenditures cents per capita was far below the annual standards set by the American Library Association of one dollar per capita (Schmitzer, 1997). Kentucky libraries circulated only one book per capita compared to the association's standard of five to ten books per person. This illustrates the complete inadequacy of the public libraries in Kentucky, and by 1932, Kentucky had 69 libraries in the state, with only a handful of those

located within the eastern part. The libraries that did exist in eastern Kentucky were located within urban areas and mainly belonged to churches or private clubs (Schmitzer, 1997).

However, the rural areas of eastern Kentucky held a long history of library outreach services, and the programs of the 1930s were not the first to reach these mountain communities. In 1896, the Kentucky Federation of Women's Club (FWC) created the first library services to travel into the mountains. They worked to establish home reading circles by encouraging women in rural communities to establish in-home reading groups. Unfortunately, the program did not have much success due to several challenges. These challenges included the fact that the success and structure of the program depended on the patrons themselves, and many families in these rural communities had little free time to contribute to the program (Boyd, 2007). During the summer, most families were busy planting, harvesting, preserving, and canning food to sell or store for winter (Boyd, 2007). During the winter, the location of these communities made travel a challenge because the weather was unpredictable and could prevent the distribution of library materials. Many roads in these areas were unpaved and in poor condition, making travel dangerous during specific parts of the year. Many of these homesteads were miles from each other, making it almost impossible to keep a book club going. Many reading circles did not last more than two years (Boyd, 2007).

Despite the failure of this first program, outreach services continued to try to bring literacy to the mountain communities. In 1905, the FWC established another program called "Traveling Libraries." This program contained a collection of about five thousand items that were placed into 100 wooden boxes. The boxes were placed throughout the mountain region and regularly rotated between the sites. Researchers have stated that the goal of this program was to establish locations where people from these communities could go to find books and exchange books for new items. They hoped this new program would be less affected by travel conditions and

weather (Boyd, 2007). This program was successful for a time, and in 1910, when the Kentucky Library Commission was created, the FWA transferred ownership of the "Traveling Libraries" to the commission. By 1911, the secretary and director of the commission, Fanny C. Rawson, identified 182 traveling libraries found in 82 of Kentucky's 120 counties. Researchers have shown that by the end of 1911, the population of eastern Kentucky had exceeded 1.2 million. This population relied on a collection of 8,000 items that were located within these "Travel Libraries" (Boyd, 2007).

By 1916, Berea College created the first book wagon services. For the next four years, book wagons worked to bring materials to these isolated communities. By 1921, circulation had increased to 4,775 items, including periodicals, children's books, and framed pictures. Unfortunately, the program ended in 1923 due to the first automobiles replacing wagons in the area, and by 1933, the state's official "Travel Library" program ended. This left these mountain communities without library services for the next three years (Boyd, 2007).

Significant economic and extensive social changes during the 1930s changed the daily lives of the people living in the mountain areas of Kentucky. Until this time, the region's economy relied on coal mining and the railroad. However, after the Industrial Revolution took hold of the nation, researchers pointed out that the economy of Kentucky began to suffer, and mining operations began to close. By 1933, half the region's coal mines were closed, and unemployment rates had reached 40% (Boyd, 2009). Research shows that this rise in industrialization resulted in a distrust of the outside world, which developed an even stronger environment of isolation. However, Boyd points out that this rise in industrialization had a second side effect. Boyd argues that the economic oppression and dangerous working conditions of coal mining pushed mountain families to find alternative forms of livelihood. Many parents began to view literacy as a way to escape poverty and their children being forced to work in the mines. Historian Ellwood Cubberley argued that due to this rising interest in literacy, the views on education within the mountain communities began to change. Many wanted more for their children and did not want them to be forced to work in the mines and die young (Boyd, 2009). Arguing that this change in view provided the opportunity for libraries to make progress in the communities.

### ***The New Deal and the Pack Horse Library Project***

In 1933, the Great Depression was in full swing, and incumbent President Franklin Roosevelt began to take steps to stabilize the economy. Roosevelt and his staff created the New Deal. The goal of this program was to restore prosperity to America and return people to the workforce. Part of the Deal focused on creating jobs, relief programs, and education (Blayney, 1977). Roosevelt believed that the best way to get people out of poverty and off government subsidies was to give them better access to education, which meant that people had to be able to read. Therefore, the argument was that literacy was the best way to get Americans out of poverty.

To try and find a way to expand education programs and open opportunities for work, Roosevelt and his government created the Work Progress Administration (WPA) to try to substitute work for relief and bring education and culture to the American people. The goal of the WPA was to focus on local programs that would target specific parts of the community. In the eight years this administration existed, it employed about 8,500,000 individuals (Jeffrey, 2001). It was the largest and most diverse of the New Deal's plans, and by the time it was terminated in 1943, it had resulted in 8.5 million Americans returning to work. The WPA built infrastructures, cultural arts, and libraries. Researchers have argued that it changed the face of the nation through its works (Shemberger, 2016). The WPA libraries were more numerous in the southern states than in any other part of the country. This was due to the South's lack of library services in rural areas (National Archives, 1937). According to researchers, when the WPA was created, at least 40 million people in this country were without library services (National Archives, 1937 and Blayney, 1977).

By 1937, only 250 counties in Kentucky had libraries, demonstrating that library services in the state were extremely poor. A new program was created to try and fix this issue and raise literacy rates within eastern Kentucky. This program was a personal delivery service that provided library services to the people living in the most isolated areas of the region. The lack of usable roads resulted in the creation of a unique type of live bookmobile program (Boyd, 2007).

The Packhorse Library Program was created in 1936. It would end up serving Kentucky's most remote and economically distressed counties. The program

recruited local people from the area to carry books and other library materials into the mountains to residents, schools, and communities. These librarians would carry these items in saddlebags on horses, mules, and occasionally on foot (Boyd, 2009). The program would function out of small libraries that were set up throughout the six designated counties. Each Packhorse Library would have five to six carriers and one Librarian who stayed at the central library and was responsible for maintaining the collection, repairing books, formulating routes, and serving walk-in patrons (Boyd, 2007). The library's books were changed out twice a month, and due to the limited number of materials and the high demand for items, circulation was limited to one week with one book or magazine per reader and a limit of three items to a family (Chapman, 1938).

The librarians would deliver materials on routes not passable by car or traditional bookmobiles. Each carrier's route would consist of 100 to 120 miles per week. These routes were often rough and would take the librarians cross-country through the unpopulated areas and across mountains. Creek beds were used to travel through the hills as there were no roads to follow, and librarians sometimes rode for miles through canyons and along cliff faces. There were times when the terrain was so rough that they would have to leave their animals behind and finish their route on foot or by boat (Boyd, 2007). The carriers would start their day at 4:30 in the morning and finish late into the evening when they would return home and finish their responsibilities to their families (National Archives, 1937). These carriers that were hired were local people due to the fact that the WPA required that the programs use local labor. It was also because many of the mountain communities distrusted outsiders. By hiring local people, the program provided a familiar face to help develop trust between the libraries and the people (Boyd, 2007).

Materials for this program came from many different sources. Within the program's first year, tens of thousands of items, including books and magazines, were donated from schools, private donations, book drives, and more. By 1937, the program had nearly two hundred thousand books and magazines in circulation. However, as time progressed, carriers began to report a massive material shortage due to demand. Librarians requested help from all over the country by placing requests for book donations in newspapers, magazines, and radio. Librarians became publishers in creating homemade scrapbooks out of

items so damaged they could no longer be circulated, and book repair workshops were opened in many library branches (Boyd, 2007). Over 2,000 original homemade scrapbooks were created by librarians for the use of their patrons (Vance, 2012). Historians have argued that many of the donated materials would have been unusable in public libraries, but they met the needs of the Packhorse program. Since members of this program could not buy items, old copies of magazines comprised a large portion of the collection (Chapman, 1938). Through the conversations that the Packhorse Librarians had with their patrons, they found that novels were generally not read, as many in the mountain communities felt that they were sinful. However, it was found that many did enjoy stories about cowboys and the West. Religious books were very popular, including the Bible, religious stories, Sunday school papers, and Bible pictures. Magazines were also popular, including practical uses such as *Popular Mechanic* and those about health care and cooking. Chapman states that the people in the mountain communities were hungry for factual information. Biographies and travel tales held a practical fascination. However, the highest demand was for juvenile literature. This was because many adults in these communities did not have primary education. Therefore, this type of literature was helpful in learning reading skills while also making it possible for everyone to enjoy the stories (Chapman, 1938).

Contrary to the hillbilly stereotypes, the people in the mountain communities were very interested in the outside world, which resulted in the Packhorse program becoming an educational program for both adults and children. The new rise in education produced a rise in living standards within the mountain communities. This is likely due to more information on health and hygiene (Schmitzer, 1997). By 1937, the program was in its second year, and according to a report filed by the administration, the program was circulating about 60,000 items per month, thereby serving 26,000 families and 155 public schools (Boyd, 2007).

The program officially ended in 1943. According to many historians, this left 52 counties in Kentucky without library services, many of which were located in eastern Kentucky. By 1948, at least 62% of the population in the United States was without library access, leaving eastern Kentucky worse off than before the Great Depression (Boyd, 2009). However, historians have argued that the program was a success

for both the WPA and the Kentucky Division of Library Services as it was able to establish a working program within the Appalachia Mountain region, broke down barriers between the mountain communities and the outside world, assisted in improving the way of life within these communities, and created a movement to get permanent library services into the area (Boyd, 2007).

### ***Women in Kentucky Libraries***

Historians such as Michael Blayney argue that Eleanor Roosevelt realized two things when helping to create the New Deal. First, in a time when food, clothing, medicine, and jobs were almost impossible to get, funding libraries and literacy programs would be even more impossible (Blayney, 1977). Second, she realized that many households at this time were being run by single mothers whose husbands had left them. These women were trying to run their homes and feed their families. Roosevelt argued that women needed a way to work to support their families (Schmitzer, 1997). Due to this, Congress mandated that projects needed to be created to make women professionals who were "socially useful" (Swain, 1995, p. 266). This led to the creation of departments within the WPA that focused on creating jobs for women, and one area that women dominated was the library (Swain, 1995, p. 279).

Known affectingly as the "book women," women played some of the most significant roles in libraries during the New Deal era. Many local librarians hired as part of the Packhorse Library program were local farm girls trying to support their families. Historians have stated that nearly one thousand local women were hired as part of the program to be librarians, carriers, and part of repair teams. Most Packhorse librarians were 25 to 35 years old, married, and were the sole providers for their families (Boyd, 2007). Chapman argues that the main reason the program was so successful was because they used local women. He argued that although most people in these mountain communities were eager to learn new things, there was still hostility towards outside influences. The program would have failed if the program had not used local women familiar with the area's culture and social expectations who presented a non-threatening approach. This was because the program was essentially a house-by-house word-of-mouth campaign, which allowed the librarians to not only build a connection and trust with the people but also allowed the families whose trust they had gained the ability to promote them to other families. The

mountain people followed an old European concept where you distrust someone until you find out they are friends of your friends (Chapman, 1938). Women played an intricate part in Kentucky libraries during the 1930's. Researchers have shown that without these women leading the WPA library division and running libraries and delivery services, Kentucky libraries would not have survived the Great Depression. Historians have also argued that without women playing such intricate roles in the WPA libraries, library services would have never returned to the mountain communities.

### **Analysis**

The image of the Packhorse Librarian has lived in the romantic hearts of people for years. It has created the idea of a group of people who would do anything to bring education and books to millions. The research has shown that living in the mountain communities of eastern Kentucky was hard, and families within these communities were motivated to create better lives for their children to prevent them from having to work in the region's mines. This incentive for education created interest in the outside world and a want for education and new opportunities. However, due to the lack of roads and successful library services within the region, access to the outside was virtually nonexistent. This isolationism became even more pronounced with the economic crisis of the 1930s, where outside influences in the mountain areas of eastern Kentucky disappeared. Despite five decades of attempts to establish library services within eastern Kentucky, there were no existing library services in the region's rural areas. However, with the creation of the New Deal, the WPA, and most importantly, the Packhorse Library Project, the existence of library services within the region became possible. The continuing existence of library services was caused by the program focusing on not only books but also the people reading the books.

In the past, the outreach programs created for the mountain communities depended on the mountain people creating and maintaining something themselves or going to the library. The Packhorse program brought the library to the people through members of the already established community. People worked hard to keep it alive and to keep it going. The Packhorse Library Program saved library services in eastern Kentucky through trust, communication, and creating a pathway into the community. The program faced many challenges when it started, as many viewed it as the same as the

past programs that failed them. These challenges included but were not limited to prejudice toward the outside world and outside people. Over the years, this region was taken advantage of by the industrial world which in turn caused this prejudice to develop. This tendency for the rest of the world to view the Appalachian Mountain region as a backwoods, hillbilly, uneducated region created hard feelings and mistrust, resulting in a hesitation from the mountain region to trust outsiders who come bearing gifts. Despite a great interest in the outside world, it took librarians a long time to convince the people in the mountain communities that the library services they were offering were, in fact, free. Experience taught these communities that everything comes at a price. If it had not been for the fact that the librarians were local people who understood the culture, beliefs, and fears, it would not have succeeded. These librarians realized that the only way for this program to succeed was for it to become something more than its original conception (Schmitzer, 1997). The main reason this program succeeded is because the librarians were able to show that they viewed the mountain people as people and were willing to go above and beyond for their patrons. To accomplish this, the librarians took steps to prove they truly cared by connecting with their patrons, whether they were an adult or child. Examples of this connection included when one of the librarians was told that a sick child was in a cabin up the mountain. The Librarian braved the dangerous terrain to find a seven-year-old disabled girl lying on a pallet; the Librarian sat by her side and read to her (National Archives, 1937). This example shows that librarians took the time to sit and talk or read to their patrons, even though they did not have to do this. They could have continued along the same lines as the past programs that left the book and went away, but they did not. They chose to give more. Other examples of them going above and beyond include bringing medicine, doctors, and midwives to help or carrying messages and news between the communities or down the mountain (Boyd, 2007). The Librarian's new and expanded role was the driving force in developing this program and guaranteed its success. Developing these individual relationships between the librarians and the patrons and the librarians' ability to adapt their program to the needs and resources of the different communities allowed them to develop and grow reading, literacy, and a new way of life in these mountain communities.

However, it was not just the program itself that saved the library services in the mountain ranges of Kentucky but also the women who gave the program life. Women within the local communities were the ones who brought literacy programs such as the Packhorse Library Project to the communities in eastern Kentucky. The library services made their way into the mountain communities by way of women's clubs, and this continued as many of the Packhorse Library programs were started due to the efforts of women like Mrs. A.J. Tucker. Tucker was a member of the Allais, Kentucky PTA. She wrote a letter to the head administrator of the program, Ellen Woodward, stating, "I am writing for further information about the Pack Horse Library Project. We do not have a complete library in our school, and the children do not have enough reading material available" (Schmitzer, 1997, p. 64). The evidence shows that throughout the history of eastern Kentucky, women brought library services to the mountains, from reading groups to traveling libraries, and now with the Packhorse Library Project. Without the women of Kentucky, there would be no library services or literacy programs within the mountain communities.

Women were involved in the WPA library programs at all levels of the association as administrators, librarians, Packhorse carriers, book repairers, scrapbook creators, fundraisers, and organizers and facilitators of book collection drives. Over one thousand women worked for the Packhorse program during its seven years of operation (Boyle, 2009), while thousands of others volunteered their services to ensure this program was a success. Many different aspects went into facilitating this program to keep the programs running and materials circulating. Women took on the challenge of creating materials for the library collection in many ways. When the WPA library programs began, women were hired to travel the country, writing travel guides, recording life histories and oral stories, interviewing former slaves about their lives, and conducting regional social and ethnic studies (Vance, 2012). Their efforts created material to build library collections and preserve America's history. Women became authors in their own right, creating materials that would interest the people in the mountain communities as it would give them information about the outside world.

This development of library collections took on many forms, including book drives such as those run by women like Mrs. Malcolm McLeod. Mrs. McLeod was a prominent citizen in Pittsburgh who began

collecting books and periodicals for the Packhorse program by placing ads in newspapers, sending letters, and making appeals to her friends, the city, and the organizations she was involved in (Ayers, 1936). Through her efforts and others like her, thousands of items were sent to the Packhorse Library headquarters in London, Kentucky. The involvement of women, such as Mrs. McLeod, who ran book drives, fundraisers, and women's story collectors, kept the program going and helped to create its foundation. Without women like Mrs. McLeod, the programs would have failed before they even started.

Women also helped build library collections for the Packhorse program through the creation of scrapbooks. There was such a high demand for materials by the mountain people that the existing collection began to fall apart as time went on. To try and keep using damaged items and have materials for the communities, women who worked for the program began to take old, damaged items and turn them into something new through the creation of scrapbooks. These scrapbooks were a combination of clippings from periodicals that had fallen apart and could no longer be circulated and focused on topics that the patrons wanted, including recipes, home remedies, biblical cards, Christmas cards, and bird cards (Vance, 2012). Women used their skills and knowledge to create items to maintain the program. The steps that the women working for the program took to ensure there were materials for the programs went above and beyond. Throughout the state of Kentucky, women took steps to make sure that the Packhorse Library Project succeeded. This proves that although it was a government-created program, it was actually a grassroots movement to bring literacy and library services to eastern Kentucky. It was created, facilitated, and maintained by the women of eastern Kentucky and would have failed without their hard work, ingenuity, and dedication.

After the end of the Packhorse program, many librarians returned to their farms or became teachers. However, some continued to serve in local public libraries for many decades, working to return library services to the mountain communities. The 1950s brought paved roads to the mountain areas, allowing for the expansion of bookmobiles and the return of library services. The arrival of the bookmobile to the mountain communities can be attributed to women such as Mary Gray. Gray was a Packhorse Librarian from Louisville, Kentucky, who, after the program ended in 1943, became a charter member of the

Friends of Kentucky Libraries. By 1948, Gray began campaigning to establish a bookmobile program in eastern Kentucky. Gray and the State Library Extension Division Director, Frances Jane Porter, convinced local libraries and state officials that a bookmobile program was needed. Gray's efforts resulted in six bookmobiles serving counties in eastern Kentucky by the end of 1948 (Boyle, 2009), which returned library services to the mountain communities.

The impact of the Packhorse Library Project can be seen years after the program ended in 1943. In 1956, Kentucky Representative Carl D. Perkins introduced new legislation to provide the state's first federal funding for public libraries. This legislation came about because of the work of the Packhorse librarians. Perkins taught in a one-room classroom in Knott County, Kentucky, during the 1930s. He thanked the Packhorse Librarian Program for his lifelong support of public libraries, and his direct contact with the Packhorse Librarians inspired him to be a defender of libraries for the rest of his life. This legislation provided public libraries and bookmobile programs to eastern Kentucky, all because of the Packhorse Librarians (Boyd, 2007). One of the most significant legacies that the Packhorse Library Program left behind was that it created a love of reading for hundreds of thousands of mountain people while also exposing these isolated communities to a vast and ever-changing world. Carry Lynch was a teacher in Leslie County, Kentucky, during the Great Depression who wrote, "The Pack Horse Library Project was the thing that really got the children interested in reading and gave them the desire to read" (Boyd, 2007, p. 125). This illustrates how the Packhorse Library Program changed the lives of the people in the mountain communities by instilling a love of reading and learning, improving their way of life, and expanding their choices in life so that they would not die in the mines like their ancestors.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence above has shown that the Packhorse Library Project saved libraries within eastern Kentucky. If it had not been for the creation of this project, library services may have died out. The program only succeeded because they used the knowledge of local women who made the project about the people, not just the numbers. From its very beginning, the Packhorse Library Project was created, facilitated, kept alive, and continued in other forms by women. This is not surprising as women were the

beginning of literacy movements in the region and were a fundamental part of the success and continuity of this program. The legacy the Packhorse Library Project left behind can be seen in many forms through bookmobiles, public libraries, and other outreach services. It can be seen that the continuous achievements made by the communities found in the mountain region of eastern Kentucky are due to the Packhorse Library Project.

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