

PACK HORSE LIBRARIANS – Paper for Torch Club 3/11/2021

By: Kris Stahl

Introduction:

It is dark and the stars are still shining in the early morning sky as the woman mounts her horse to begin her day as a Pack Horse Librarian, traveling over the rocky terrain and treacherous creek beds of the remote regions of the Appalachian Mountains in rural Eastern Kentucky. Between 1935 and 1943 Pack Horse Librarians (mostly women,) also known as “Book Women,” “Book Ladies,” and “Packsaddle Librarians,” served the residents and schools of rural Eastern Kentucky. Join me in learning about these librarians, and see if you agree with me that our country owes them an enormous debt of gratitude for their role in educating and shaping our country.

Background:

Rural Eastern Kentucky is a geographically isolated area where historically many people did not have access to books – in 1936 approximately 31 per cent of the people were illiterate. In 1896 the Kentucky Federation of Women’s Clubs had created traveling libraries known as “bookmobiles.” However, the lack of roads and cities in the mountains proved to be too much of a challenge over the years, so in 1933 the bookmobiles were discontinued. The only way to travel was by foot, horse, or mule. 63 counties in Kentucky had no library services at all in the early 1930’s.

This was Kentucky after the stock market crash in 1929. Kentucky, known for its main resource of coal, was one of the hardest hit states because of factories shutting down and the increased use of natural gas. Farming was almost impossible because the Ohio River flooded in 1930, washing away the thin layer of topsoil. In poor families, mothers died from malnutrition, many fathers left because they could not bear to see their families suffer, and children did not have food, clothing, or shelter.

These people lived in log cabins that had no windows and the door was left open year-round for light and ventilation. The log cabins were poorly constructed shacks in the hills where walls were insulated with newspapers to try to keep out the winter cold. There was no electricity, no running water, and no indoor plumbing. The people were out of touch with the world because they did not have newspapers, telephones, or radios. Some children attended one room school houses that had very few textbooks, almost no libraries, and or no books at all. Many other children who did not attend school were illiterate. Some Kentuckians traced their heritage back to pre-Revolutionary War days, and their ways of living hadn't changed much since that time. Most were conservative, God-fearing people.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the New Deal relief program in 1933 and then expanded the New Deal by adding the Works Progress (later changed to "Project") Administration. The goals of the WPA were to put people to work and to promote social and cultural awareness through art, theater, and literature. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was an enthusiastic advocate for putting women to work.

It was during this time that the WPA provided free public library service to many areas of the country, especially in poor rural areas. Due to the shortage of funds, libraries had been a very low priority for the U.S. government. Now there would be library service, but getting the books distributed to the people was a huge challenge. Eventually librarians used a variety of methods to deliver and pick up the books and magazines, including small flatboats to navigate the backwaters of Mississippi and Louisiana.

The most innovative method of delivery, however, was Eastern Kentucky's Pack Horse Library Project. In 1933, Federal Emergency Relief Director Harry Hopkins sent Lorena Hickock, a former reporter for the "Minneapolis Tribune" to report on the conditions in Eastern Kentucky. She reported that she found some people lived in abandoned mining camps, others lived in small communities without any kind of sanitation, up at the headwaters of creeks, in the mountains.

She learned that five babies up one of those creeks had died from starvation in the previous ten days. She also met an old woman “half dead from pellagra (a skin disease caused by malnutrition,) stumbling along on bare, gnarled old feet, begging for food. “ (pages 2-3.) First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s support for the WPA Pack Horse Librarian project made it possible for them to deliver books to people who had never had them before. Their work wasn’t only to entertain – it was to educate people, inform them about the world, and help them have a better life. The WPA paid the salaries for the librarians to maintain a headquarters library, usually at the county seat, and to distribute books on horseback along various routes that alternated week by week. The government, however, did not pay for the books – the books were all donated.

The centers were at local schools, in a community center, a post office, or even in a home. The Pack Horse Librarians were a dedicated, tough group of women who traveled on horses and mules in all kinds of weather over rocky terrain and treacherous creek beds. There were eight Pack Horse Libraries in operation by 1936. It was estimated that approximately 33,000 books were circulated to approximately 57,000 families that year. (Wikipedia )

Although there were a few male Pack Horse Librarians, the majority of the Librarians were young women, most of whom were the only person working in their families. They were single or married, with or without children, and worked in their hometown areas where they were known and earned the trust of the local people. Generally, the people were wary of the librarians, even though they were their friends and neighbors. Some people thought the books might be immoral. The librarians had to earn the people’s trust through patience and friendship.

The Pack Horse Librarians were hired at a modest monthly rate of \$28.00 to ride horses with saddle bags packed full of books, magazines, WPA bulletins, reference materials, and homemade scrapbooks to deliver to the poor families and one-room school houses located on the trails of the back hills and valleys of Eastern Kentucky. Most popular materials included useful magazines, such as “Women’s Home Companion” and “Popular Mechanics.”

These magazines provided practical information on subjects including home health care, cooking, child care, hygiene, parenting, canning, agriculture, hunting, and machinery. People learned about life in foreign lands by reading “National Geographic” and enjoyed learning from stories about the American West. Many of the popular books and authors were ones we still read today – Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver’s Travels, and the works of Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare. One of the most requested books was The Bible. Children’s books were in the greatest demand, and not only for the children. Many of the adults had never learned to read, so enjoyed the pictures, and sometimes even learned to read from their children reading to them.

#### A Pack Horse Librarian’s Typical Day:

Here is a typical day for a Pack Horse Librarian – I will call her “Rose”....

Morning – Rose mounts her trusty horse and starts out in the dark when the stars are still shining in the sky. It was especially hard to ride up and down the stony hillsides if it had rained or snowed earlier. Rose sings or whistles old gospel tunes as she rides along. Her first stop is at the home of a moonshiner who is recovering from a gunshot wound. (Moonshine is illegally distilled corn whiskey.) Even though moon-shining is illegal, he was desperate to make enough money for his family to live on. The cabin is typical of many in the hills: no doors, no windows, kerosene lamps, walls covered with old newspapers

to keep out the cold, wood floors, a wood burning fireplace with ashes on the hearth and a shotgun hung over the mantel, old iron bed frames, no indoor plumbing, and the adult men and women smoking corn cob pipes. Rose brings the moonshiner's wife some magazines, an old copy of "Life" magazine and a newer copy of "Women's Home Companion." She brings a Sunday School pamphlet to the four little children who are all huddling together in the same bed, trying to stay warm. Because the moonshiner is illiterate, Rose also reads to him, as well as his children who never go to school.

One of her favorite stops is next – the one room school house where as many as forty-five students will share the few books she brings them – one of their favorites is Robinson Crusoe. She adds a health book, a book about the weather, and some poetry. The school year for these children is from July to the end of February when the children will help their parents with planting.

Afternoon -- Traveling on, Rose meets up with a woman who has walked nine miles to return books to Rose and to exchange them for new books. That woman will walk another nine miles to return to her home up in the hills. Around 3:00 p.m. and still not having had any lunch yet, Rose arrives at a cabin where there is a 15 year old young woman, pregnant with her second child. She brings her some "doctor books" about child rearing and giving birth. These were very proud people who, although they were very poor, still wanted to pay for any services they might receive, so this young woman pays her by sharing her grandmother's recipe for rice pudding. When she was at the school house earlier, one of the boys there insisted she take his "payment" of two walnuts which would have been his lunch.

Heading towards home, Rose hears a roaring sound – she discovers that recent rains have swollen the creek, pushing it over its banks. Creek names around here have names such as: "Hell-for-Sartin Creek," "Troublesome Creek," and "Cut Shin Creek." Rose debates whether to push her horse to cross through the cold rushing water of the creek to get to her home about a mile away, or to retrace her 20 mile route to get back home safely. Rose decides to go ahead across the creek. It is 5:00 p.m.

and dark when she arrives home, safe but feeling like her feet are frozen. She takes the saddle off of her horse and wraps a blanket around him and will feed and rub him down after her own supper.

Tomorrow is another day for Rose, the Pack Horse Librarian, to travel another route with her saddle bag full of reading treasures for the poor people in the back hills of Kentucky.

#### Additional Pack Horse Librarian Job Tasks

The Librarians kept a system wherein they distributed the books on their circuit for about a month, then returned them to the central headquarters to be cleaned and mended, and then transferred them to another circuit. Each headquarters had between four and six Librarians who went out three or four times a week on a different route each day, and then repeated the routes every two weeks. The routes were approximately eighteen miles long, so the Pack Horse Librarians traveled fifty to eighty miles each week. The Librarians met weekly at the headquarters to write reports and help clean and mend the books.

Cleaning and mending the books was an important part of their jobs. The books were precious and many were not in very good condition because of originally being donated. They were already considered discards – too worn to use. They got further worn out because of being hauled in saddlebags, string bags, pillowcases, and suitcases. The most damage came from the frequent use by the patrons. One of their bad habits was to “dog ear” the pages. Some of the Librarians solved that problem by giving the patrons bookmarks made out of old Christmas cards as rewards. The children treasured them since many of them had never seen a Christmas card before.

One of the problems the Librarians encountered was the people's pride. Many of the women did not want to take something without paying for it or giving something back in return. As time went on, the women gave the Librarians their recipes and quilt patterns to show their gratitude. The Librarians then started creating scrapbooks that included those recipes and patterns, as well as articles and stories that they saved from the worn out magazines. Some of these scrapbooks actually went into circulation and some became beloved treasures for the Librarians. One was believed to have been given as a gift to President or Mrs. Roosevelt and can be found in the archives collection at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York.

#### Pack Horse Librarian Champion

The champion and person in charge of the Pack Horse Librarian Program was Mrs. Lena B. Nofcier, Chairman of Library Service for the Kentucky PTA. She led the efforts to fill the libraries with books. Most of the libraries started with two hundred to eight hundred books which had to serve between five thousand and ten thousand people. She was an influential woman who argued for funds to support the program. She told a Kentucky parent teacher organization, "It is impossible for a teacher to conduct classes without books and other printed aids." She went on to say "After a child learns to read, he must have access to books." She also said, "Library service should be provided for all people, rural as well as urban, colored as well as white." She contacted PTA's around the state, pleading with them for donations. Boy Scout troops, Sunday School classes, and children's school groups sent materials to local collection points.

Mrs. Nofcier's most successful effort was her establishment of the Penny Fund. She asked every PTA member in the state to give at least one penny for the purchase of books for the Pack Horse libraries. New children's books cost between \$1.75 and \$2.00, and the Penny Fund helped purchase new books throughout the entire existence of the Pack Horse Library Project.

The Pack Horse Library Project became a successful program in various ways. It relied on the local communities, took people off the relief rolls, and set an example of toughness and patriotism. It also set an example of thriftiness and recycling – cheese boxes became card files; prune boxes became sorting boxes for incoming donations; old license plates folded to a ninety degree angle served as bookends; broom handles served as newspaper racks; and one library used an auto jack as a book press for binding the collections of scrapbooks created from discards.

### Results

There were some drawbacks. One family complained that they had to buy more lamp oil because of their son's new nightly reading habits; another parent only allowed one book at a time for her family to prevent squabbles among her children; and another parent complained that he had problems getting his children to do their chores because they just wanted to sit and read.

However, the benefits were great. In The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek a source reported that more than 1,000 women served in the Project, and nearly 600,000 residents in thirty eastern "pauper" counties were served by them. (p. 479)

### The WPA Library Project in Wisconsin



Although the circumstances were not the same, Wisconsin also suffered from the lack of funds for libraries during The Depression. The WPA supported our libraries as well. The Wisconsin Historical Society's Historical Essay, entitled "WPA (In Wisconsin,) reported:

"In Wisconsin, by 1933 the majority of the state's banks had closed, retail sales and tax collections plummeted, and nearly 400,000 residents were on welfare or some other kind of relief." It went on to report, "Results of the WPA in Wisconsin": Between 1935 and 1940, professional and community service programs taught 9,437 people how to read and write."

#### Ending of The Program

Although it was a successful program, the Pack Horse Library Project in Eastern Kentucky did not last long. The economy rebounded, World War II was in full swing, and the WPA was dismantled in 1943. The Pack Horse Libraries could no longer pay the workers. Their work may have been done, but their influence carried on for many years, leaving a legacy of the love of reading in so many people.

Between 1943 and 1957 when bookmobiles became more common, eastern Kentuckians still had little or no library service. Nothing matched the services that had been provided by the Pack Horse Librarians. This changed in 1956 when Carl D. Perkins, Congressman from Kentucky, sponsored the Library Services Act that made the first federal appropriations for library service. He may have been influenced by his earlier personal experience as a teacher in a rural school that had been serviced by a Pack Horse Librarian.

The Library Service Act (LSA) helped provide funds for building new libraries, branch libraries, the purchase of bookmobiles, library collections, and the hiring of new librarians, all of which eventually evolved into one of the world's best library systems. According to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Kentucky's public libraries had 75 bookmobiles in 2014 – the largest number in the nation. (McGraw)

It is inspiring to think of people in such dire circumstances being educated and uplifted by the dedicated Pack Horse Librarians who selflessly gave not only books, but also gave kindness, knowledge, compassion, and inspiration to their neighbors and countrymen. We may never know the full extent of their work, but I hope that you the reader of this paper, believe along with me, that they truly changed the course of U. S. history for the better. As Kathie Appelt and Jeanne Cannella Schmitzer wrote in their book, Down Cut Shin Creek, The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky, "The Kentucky Pack Horse Library Project and its book women deserve credit for their services, and acknowledgment for their part in library history – indeed in the very history of our country. What they gave to their constituents couldn't be measured in money, for what they gave was no less than the keys to the world." (p. 54)

WORKS CITED

Appelt, Kathi & Schmitzer, Jeanne Cannella. *Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001.

Lackore James. *The W.P.A. in Wisconsin*. (Masters Thesis, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1966); Wisconsin Dept. of Public Welfare, "The W.P.A. in Wisconsin: 1935-43" in Public Welfare Review (first quarter, 1943.) Wisconsin History Collection.

Lowell, Amy. 1874-1925. *The Giver of Stars*. Poem: Published in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. The Macmillan Company, 1914.

McGraw, Eliza. "Horse-Riding Librarians Were The Great Depression's Bookmobiles." Smithsonian Magazine. smithsonianmag.com June 21, 2017

Moyes, Jojo. *The Giver of Stars*. New York: Random House, 2019.

Richardson, Kim Michele. *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*. Thorndike Press, 2019.

Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pack\\_Horse\\_Library\\_Project&oldid=984378597](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pack_Horse_Library_Project&oldid=984378597)

Last edited 19 October 2020, at 20:10 (UTC).

You Tube Videos:

“*Pack Horse Librarians*”: [youtube.com/watch?v=A6WTdXYHF6o](https://youtube.com/watch?v=A6WTdXYHF6o). 5/9/2013. 3:54 minutes.

“*Kentucky’s Pack Horse Librarians Make For Fascinating Reading*”: [youtube.com/watch?v=yS-xdWsKA6g](https://youtube.com/watch?v=yS-xdWsKA6g). 8:42 minutes.

Richardson, Kim Michele:

Book Club Review of The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek:

[youtube.com/watch?v=MB10h8SI0pQ](https://youtube.com/watch?v=MB10h8SI0pQ). 8/15/19. 4:20 minutes.

Book Club Review of The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek:

[youtube.com/watch?v=dkf4xK7TkNo](https://youtube.com/watch?v=dkf4xK7TkNo). 6/7/19. 9:18 minutes.

“*Brandi Reads*”: The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek:

[youtube.com/watch?v=FH7BwGjlv6w](https://youtube.com/watch?v=FH7BwGjlv6w). 5/6/19. 23.36 minutes.

Book Trailer: The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek: [youtube.com/watch?v=pytN4Lrsees](https://youtube.com/watch?v=pytN4Lrsees).

5/6/19. 1:42 minutes.

Book Trailer with Song: The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek:

[youtube.com/watch?v=tPPvkTkxnNc](https://youtube.com/watch?v=tPPvkTkxnNc). Song Lyrics by Ruby Friedman. 7/14/19. 3:36 minutes.

Song: “*The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*.” Ruby Friedman. May also be found at:

[Facebook.com/KimMicheleRichardson/videos/319190235689593](https://Facebook.com/KimMicheleRichardson/videos/319190235689593).

Kim Michele Richardson in Conversation with Bren McClain (9/28/19)

[youtube.com/watch?v=SSWaJzp-p2c](https://youtube.com/watch?v=SSWaJzp-p2c). 11/8/19 1 hr:04:51

PACK HORSE LIBRARIANS – TODAY

Kris Stahl 3/11/21

My paper ends here, but it is not entirely ancient history. There is a current controversy – two books have been written recently about the Pack Horse Librarians:

- 1) The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek: written by Kim Michele Richardson is a fictional story about a Pack Horse Librarian named Cussy Mary Carter. Ms. Richardson began writing her book in 2016 and published it in May 2019.
  
- 2) The Giver of Stars: written by Jojo Moyes is a fictional story about a young English woman, Alice Wright, who comes to Kentucky and marries a local man. She also becomes a Pack Horse Librarian. Ms. Moyes published her book in October 2019, just five months after Ms. Richardson's book. It is currently being made into a movie.

There is a controversy because readers of both books reported striking similarities in Ms. Moyes book to situations and circumstances in Ms. Richardson's book. Ms. Richardson checked with her attorneys about the similarities, and they determined that no legal action was necessary. It does not appear that the controversy is resolved at this time.

---

I have one last thing for you. I would like to share a song video from Facebook. The song is:

“The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek” written and sung by Ruby Friedman and her orchestra, to accompany the book trailer of the same name. There are some wonderful photographs of some of the Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky.

([Facebook.com/KimMicheleRichardson/videos/319190235689593](https://www.facebook.com/KimMicheleRichardson/videos/319190235689593))