

# WPA Library Projects

By Ellen S. Woodward \*

APPROXIMATELY one-third of the population of America is without any reasonable sort of public library service.

Attention was called to this fact in "A Suggested Program for Action" by the American Library Association at a council meeting held in Richmond, Virginia, May 11, 1936.

It was this recognition of the need not only for the maintenance of facilities already existing, but for expanded library service, that led to the establishment of Works Progress Administration library projects. These projects, which employ approximately 14,500 needy people, are in operation in 45 States, in New York City, and in the District of Columbia. Their operation is one of the outstanding functions of the Division of Women's and Professional Projects of the WPA.

All Works Progress Administration projects are sponsored by public tax-supported

bodies. Originating in the states, they represent what the communities desire and request. Library projects are sponsored by public library commissions or by boards of education, whose current budgets do not permit the performance of the work concerned without Federal assistance. The WPA pays the wages of the needy workers on these projects. Where such workers already were experienced in library work they were and are placed in charge of projects. Many others, with no experience in the field have been given valuable training.

The services rendered to communities by WPA library projects cover library extension, book repair, and book cataloging and indexing. As a result of the program hundreds of communities now enjoy a library service which they never before had.

## LIBRARY EXTENSION

Under the WPA Library Extension program, approximately 2300 new libraries have been established, whereby reading facilities are furnished to communities which were without such service. Over 3400 reading rooms have been established in libraries that already existed. Over 5800 traveling libraries are rendering additional services by taking reading materials to residents in sparsely settled rural areas.

In the distribution of books and magazines, it is sometimes necessary for a library worker to go on horseback and follow a difficult mountain trail. On February 1, 1938, WPA packhorse libraries employed 232 workers in 15 counties of Kentucky. One of these packhorse libraries, sponsored by the Whitley County Board of Education, operates with headquarters in the courthouse at Williamsburg, Ky. Each of the four packhorse carriers, after collecting her books and other literature from the main center at Williamsburg, travels into the mountains, appearing regularly at designated sub-centers—country schools (when the rural mountain schools are open); churches, or country stores. As many as 32 mountaineers have been found waiting at a sub-center for the packhorse carrier. In all, approximately 800 families or at least 5,200 individuals in the mountains of Whitley

County alone avail themselves of the packhorse library service.

In one county in Mississippi, a Works Progress Administration library worker has plied a houseboat along the Yazoo River, distributing reading material of various descriptions to residents of communities inaccessible to highways.

Iowa is one of the States in which the WPA is operating a motor vehicle library service thruout certain towns where branch libraries were closed several years ago because of lack of funds. The WPA has also made possible the Dubuque Traveling Library project, which services the rural schools with books needed by the pupils, but which the school boards are financially unable to provide.

### *600 Centers in South Carolina*

In South Carolina books are circulated to rural and village families from about 600 centers. A WPA library is now in operation at St. Matthews, a small town in Calhoun County which for ten years prior to the inauguration of the WPA had entirely lacked free public library service. This WPA library today serves 1,073 people. The traveling librarian drives a truck 50 miles a day, four days a week, distributing books and magazines to such sub-centers as rural schools, country stores and private homes.

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SCENES FROM LIFE WITH THE W.P.A.

(Above) A Kentucky mountain woman is here shown enjoying a book brought by a WPA pack horse librarian.

(Below) Interior view of a WPA library bookmobile in Clark County, Ohio. The WPA librarian is being assisted by the driver of the bookmobile.

In 1934, about 65 per cent of the people of Kent County, Mich., were reported to be without library facilities. As a result of the WPA library extension service, the county now has 22 library stations, with a circulation of about 2700 books a month. These stations service thirty rural schools. Because of the increased public demand for library service since the initiation of the WPA projects, the township of Caledonia, Mich., recently voted maintenance expenses for a library, and the Kent County Supervisors voted unanimously to create a County Library.

In 1934, only one cent per person was allowed for public library service in Arkansas. During 1936, 130 WPA Library projects served an estimated population of 190,000 persons—nearly all of them in the rural areas. On these projects alone, there was a circulation of 684,561 books, altho the total number of volumes available for loan was only 122,838.

At the same time the loans of magazines amounted to 81,673.

The Arkansas legislature has recently appropriated \$100,000 for library services for the people of the state during the next two years. The Governor, the Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and the Chairman of the Arkansas State Library Commission all state that this recognition came as a definite result of the Federal Work Program.

A WPA state-wide project in Ohio has made possible a circulation of some 70,000 books and magazines to approximately 300 back country centers in the State. A WPA carrier who operates out from West Union, the county seat of Adams County, follows a route where many of the roads are little more than wagon trails. During bad weather she is forced to change from her flivver, throw her books in a sack, and mount the saddle of her pony to ford the creeks and reach the one-room schoolhouses.

## BOOK REPAIR AND CATALOGING

The Book Repair projects, while giving employment to needy economic heads of families, are saving public schools and public libraries thruout the country thousands of dollars thru the reconditioning of books which have become too dilapidated for use.

In Louisiana many libraries, which would have been abandoned for lack of funds, have been revived thru WPA assistance. In many communities the books in the libraries were in very bad condition and the expense associated with the repair and rebinding of the volumes was prohibitive because of the straitened finances of the Boards of Education and the Public Library Commissions concerned. In other parishes the libraries had received no new books in many months, and the public had lost interest in the old ones. The WPA library project has remedied much of this thru a program of repair and restoration of the volumes on hand and a campaign for the inducement of donations of new books.

Books written in Braille are being repaired on WPA projects in Louisiana and other states and are being circulated among many blind readers.

A project, asked for and sponsored by the Oakland, Calif., Public Library, covers the alphabetizing, arranging, collecting, binding, lettering, cataloging and shelving of thousands of books, booklets, documents, reports, newspapers and volumes of various descriptions. Work of the project is designed to put these valuable materials in convenient form, to preserve them in the best condition possible and make them readily available for public use.

Thousands of text and library books have been completely reconditioned on WPA projects in Kent County, Mich., at a material cost of about 7½ cents a volume, or a total of \$975.00. Replacement cost of the books mended would have been approximately \$13,000.

Thousands of volumes have been completely renovated by WPA workers for the public schools and public libraries of North Dakota at an estimated cost of five cents per volume for materials.

By February 1, 1938, the total number of books reconditioned by WPA workers for public schools and public libraries had reached 29,855,417 volumes. A total of 18,272,529 volumes had been cataloged.

Thru the reconditioning and return to circulation of many thousands of damaged books and the extension of library service to communities where no such service existed, the WPA is making a contribution to our material life, the value of which appears to be universally recognized by interested public authorities.

Because of the satisfactory results obtained from the library projects, certain counties in various States which already have an enabling law are planning to continue thru their own efforts the work now being done. It has been noted also that certain other counties, which do not at this time have such a law, are laying plans for legal action which will enable them to establish permanent tax-supported libraries when funds become available.