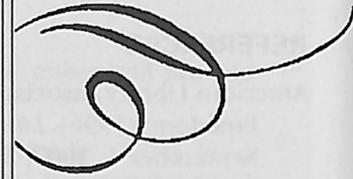


ON THE MOVE WITH THE TCPL MOBILE LIBRARY: WHAT IT TAKES TO KEEP ROLLING

by Angela Clements



The Tippecanoe County Public Library (TCPL) Mobile Library has been in business for almost forty years because the Library Board, administration, staff, and public value and support its efforts.

Needless to say, support from our system's stakeholders is the vital component to creation and continuation of this outreach service, but the operational details embedded are the nuts and bolts that keep our mobile library rolling.

According to the Indiana State Library's *Statistics of Indiana Public Libraries 2006*, out of 240 libraries, only 29 have bookmobile service. This is proof that bookmobile service in Indiana is limited and unique. So, whether you are an experienced bookmobile employee, or an administrator envisioning a mobile unit for your community, or just very curious, I hope the information in this article provides you with some interesting, practical, and useful insight into Tippecanoe County's Mobile Library service.

BOOKMOBILE HISTORIES

In order to gain a better understanding of the current use of bookmobiles both nationally and locally, it is helpful to learn about the history of past bookmobiles. After all, these rolling relics are the inspiration and foundation on which we build our service.

In the United States

Western Maryland's Historical Library (WHLIBR) is home for preserving and disseminating information about the first bookmobile and its founder. WHLIBR's *Bookmobile Collection* home Web page reports that the first bookmobile was the brainchild of a progressive and forward-thinking librarian named Mary Titcomb. In 1905, as the first librarian of Washington County Free Library in Maryland, Mary introduced the first bookmobile in the United States. Her desire to expand library resources to a countywide system was first manifested in 1904 as a deposit collection service. Sixty-six collections with thirty books per collection were delivered, by the library wagon, to general stores and post offices throughout the county. Mary was not satisfied. The

Web page provides a poignant section of her work titled *The Story of the Washington Free County Library* in which she expresses her idea to transform the service to a traveling library:

Would not a Library Wagon, the outward and visible signs of the service for which the Library stood, do much more in cementing friendship? Would the upkeep of the wagon after the first cost be much more than the present method? Is not Washington County with its good roads especially well adapted for testing an experiment of this kind, for the geography of the County is such that it could be comfortably covered by well planned routes? These and other aspects of the plan were laid before the Board of Trustees - who approved of the idea, and forthwith the librarian began interviewing wagon makers and trying to elucidate her ideas with pen and pencil... No better method has ever been devised for reaching the dweller in the country. The book goes to the man, not waiting for the man to come to the book. (Western Maryland's, n.d.)

The Library Wagon, pulled by two horses and driven by the janitor, Joshua Thomas, hit the road in April 1905. Mr. Thomas delivered books to rural homes throughout Washington County until 1910 when the wagon was hit by a freight train and demolished. Following its unfortunate demise, services resumed and deliveries were made with a motorized vehicle. Mary's inspiration, methodology, and end goals in 1905 are still relevant in 2007.

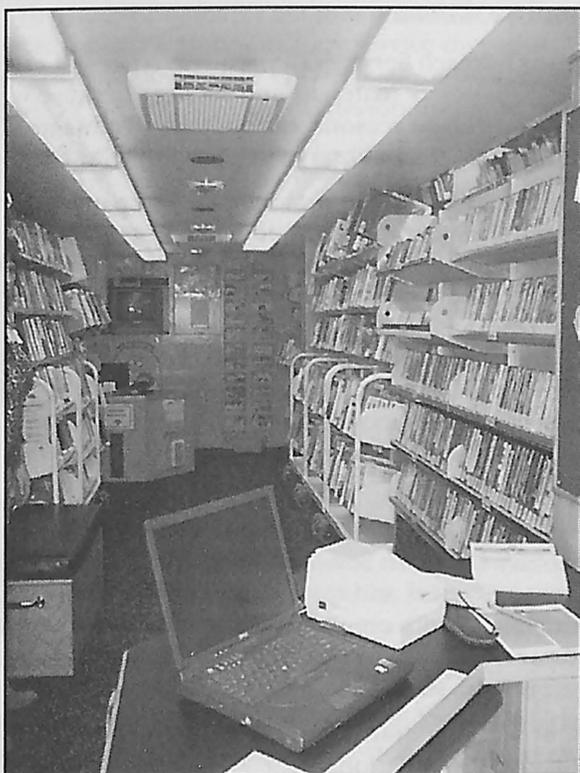
Tippecanoe County

Tippecanoe County's first bookmobile started service in August 1968. It was funded by a federal demonstration grant to serve both Tippecanoe County and the northern half of Montgomery County. When the grant expired in 1970, Montgomery County taxpayers voted against a tax levy that would continue to fund the service. In fact, service was also discontinued in Tippecanoe County until January 1971 when support from petitioners, combined with a six-month grant from the State Library, resurrected the bookmobile.

The first bookmobile was replaced in 1979 with a thirty-two foot Beechcraft unit. The third iteration of TCPL bookmobiles was a Ford Flat-Face Bus, which began service in 1988. This bus, which is a term many of our current patrons still use, was replaced in September 2002, at which time the TCPL Bookmobile became the TCPL Mobile Library.

CURRENT VEHICLE

In the world of Mobile Library service the vehicle absorbs a significant portion of our time and energy. We often sound more like mechanics and truck drivers than librarians. Our current vehicle is a unique truck and trailer combination with a gooseneck connection,



Inside of Bookmobile.

commonly called a fifth wheel. The truck is a 2002, 550 Ford Crew Cab with a 7.3 Liter Power Stroke Diesel Engine. The trailer is a converted twenty-eight foot long Featherlight. The contract for our trailer conversion was awarded to Matthews Specialty Vehicles located in Greensboro, North Carolina. The truck was delivered July 12 and the trailer on July 26, 2002. The first run was in September of the same year. The approximate cost of the truck was \$44,260 and \$107,573 for the trailer. The trailer is decorated with a vinyl wrap. The graphics for the wrap were created by one of our reference librarians. Power for the Mobile Library is provided by a twelve-kilowatt Onan diesel generator,

which is installed in the nose of the trailer. Approximately five thousand items can be shelved in the trailer.

The truck GVWR (Gross Vehicle Weight Rating) is 17,500 pounds and the trailer GVWR is 14,500 pounds. Any combination of vehicles with a GCWR (Gross Combined Weight Rating) of 26,001 or more pounds, provided the vehicle being towed is more than 10,000 pounds, is categorized, according to the *2007 Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles CDL Test Booklet*, as a Class A vehicle. Therefore, all of our drivers must have an Indiana Class A Commercial Driver's License. The head driver, outreach librarian, and department head are all well trained, licensed drivers. Before each run, the driver is legally required to perform and document a thorough inspection of the truck and trailer. In addition, both truck and trailer must pass a yearly DOT (Department of Transportation) inspection in order to remain street legal.

Vehicles of this magnitude require constant care and attention. Routine maintenance, like an oil change, is necessary. In addition, the truck and trailer systems are complex, interdependent, and vulnerable to a wide variety of damages and breakdowns. This is especially true when you factor in the weight of the trailer and continual travel often on rough roads. This year alone we have had to repair and/or replace a truck battery, a generator battery (which exploded one day when we started the generator), generator glow plugs, and the generator belt and radiator hoses. We consider the mobile library a facility. While our maintenance issues are not a direct reflection of those in a brick and mortar facility, they are parallel in the importance of our ability to provide service to our patrons.

The Mobile Library is equipped with two laptop computers. Ideally, one computer is used for check in and the other for check out. The check in computer is located in the front, or near the nose, of the trailer and



Outside of Bookmobile.

is in immediate view as patrons enter the side door. The check out computer is located in the back, or end of the trailer, and patrons exit through a back door and down a ramp. This facilitates a flow in patron traffic. Patrons return items as they enter in the front and check out before exiting out the back. Upon each arrival, we walk to the back of the trailer and release and lower a ramp and, before leaving, we lift and lock in the ramp.

Each laptop is equipped with a Sprint Mobile Broadband Access Card to enable wireless connection. Two external antennas have been installed on the roof at each end of the mobile library to enhance connectivity. Wires connecting the antennas to the cards run through the ceiling and behind and out through the walls. TCPL uses SIRSI Workflows for its circulation component. The connection is generally reliable and fairly fast, considering the amount of data we're sending and receiving. However, we often lose connection at our most remote stops at which time we resort to a stand-alone system. The stand-alone system allows us to locally gather and store check out information. The data is then saved on a storage device, which is returned to the library to be uploaded into Workflows. The disadvantage is that we cannot get "real time" response regarding a patron's borrowing status. If we have doubts, are not familiar with patrons, or need to register a new patron, we call the main library, using our cell phone to get information that allows us to complete accurate transactions.

OPERATIONS MANUAL

Almost every aspect of TCPL's mobile library, homebound, and nursing deposit collection services is organized, outlined, and described in an in-depth and thorough operations guidebook we call the *One-Minute Manual*. The manual contains a master copy of all our record-keeping documents, driving directions, important phone numbers, contact names, card and stop applications, policies, and procedures and practices. Our manual is fluid and organic. There are often modifications to circulation procedures, changes in nursing home contact names and material requests, and fluctuations in driving directions and stop schedules. Yet the manual provides stable and appropriate guidelines to ensure that processes, decisions, and solutions are grounded in a solid foundation of best practices, knowledge, and experience.

Mobile Library Section

The Tippecanoe County Public Library's Mobile Library is one of 39 in the state of Indiana. Like all libraries, there are similarities and differences in the way we operate. A combination of factors has evolved in the past forty years that have contributed to the formation of the current Mobile Library section of our

One-Minute Manual. These factors include TCPL's history, mission statement, policies and procedures, community, and *ABOS (Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services) Bookmobile Guidelines* as well as other libraries' bookmobile policies and procedures. The Mobile Library section of the *One-Minute Manual* is organized and divided into subsections. The subsections used most frequently contain information about our statement of purpose, stop criteria, service priorities, daily and monthly routines, and instructions for special situations.

Statement of Purpose

Our Outreach Statement of Purpose is the philosophical foundation on which we build our service. The Statement of Purpose currently documented in our *One Minute Manual* states:

The Outreach Services Department strives to provide library materials and services to those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot take advantage of them at the main library.

However, many of our Mobile Library patrons return materials from the other facilities so we know they use at least one of our three buildings. Clearly, for many of our patrons, convenience is a driving factor for Mobile Library usage. Still, our main focus is to continue to identify and serve citizens that need the convenience. Our current working draft statement of purpose addresses mobile library service criteria to include users who value the convenience and users who need the convenience.

It is the role of the Tippecanoe County Public Library Outreach Services Department to deliver library services and resources to persons outside the library with emphasis on those who are un-served or underserved due to physical, economic, social, geographic, or other barriers.

Our working draft furthers defines un-served and underserved populations.

Definition of Underserved Populations for Mobile Library Service priorities:

Geographic:

- Communities of persons residing three or more miles from a public library facility
- Students whose school does not have an in-house library and are two or more miles from a public library facility.

Socioeconomic:

- Communities/neighborhoods/educational institutions in which fees or rent are determined on a sliding scale or are government subsidized
- Nursing Homes, Senior Housing, and Assisted Living facilities residents

- Facilities that house and/or educate physically and mentally disabled persons
- Persons who are incarcerated

In addition to providing service to the above-defined populations, the TCPL Mobile Library may also reach underserved populations by expanding service to:

Convenience Clusters:

- Workplace stops
- Consumer/commercial stops
- Promotional/Special Event stops

Daycares/ Summer Camps:

In order for daycares and/or summer camps to be eligible for TCPL Mobile Library service they must be licensed, have at least 15 children ages 2-14 registered and meet at least one other criterion in the list below:

- Located 2 miles or more from a library facility
- Receive government assistance, enrollment fees determined on a sliding scale, or have children receiving government assistance
- No facility owned vehicle(s) capable of legally transporting groups of children.

Stop Criteria

The stop criteria section provides the fundamental principles on which selection, retention, and deletion decisions are made for all our service points. Many of these principles are widely used and some variations can be found in the *Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services Guidelines (2004)* (ALA Office for Literacy, n.d.). Before adding a new stop, a representative or contact person for that stop should first complete a standardized stop application form. The application addresses the criteria essential for consideration. When we consider adding a new stop, the stops must:

- Be located in Tippecanoe County
- Reflect the Statement of Purpose of the Outreach Services Department
- Be evaluated by priority level
- Provide ample room to maneuver, park, and provide ample room for patron accessibility

and should:

- Provide a sufficient level of safety
- Fit into the schedule geographically
- Allow consistent wireless connectivity
- Be allowed to promote or advertise service.

Priority levels also help us in our stop selections and are included in the *Schedule* section below.

Daily, Weekly, and Monthly

Much of the mobile library's day-to-day staff activities mirror those of the brick and mortar facilities. Daily tasks and responsibilities that occur in the office and on the Mobile can include checking books in and out, registering new patrons, replacing lost cards, placing, canceling and trapping holds, dealing with damaged items, shelving, item selection and rotation, patron and item database maintenance, and more.

In addition to these standard, library-related tasks, preparing the mobile library for business also requires processes unique to the service. Staff must follow set-up and tear down procedures before the mobile leaves and each time it returns. In addition, the driver must perform and document a full inspection of the truck and trailer before each run as well as schedule various required, maintenance routines for the vehicle. Our *One-Minute Manual* addresses all of these operations by including instructions for each and every one of the processes listed above along with vehicle mileage and fuel reports, routine maintenance checklists, and master copies of all the documents needed for record keeping.

Special Situations

Sometimes, we are forced to cancel stops due to inclement weather, dangerous road conditions, or mechanical malfunctions. When our patrons experience this interruption in service, we handle it as if their library has closed due to circumstances beyond their control. This philosophy guides our procedures. The routine for handling these situations is outlined in the manual. We immediately send an e-mail to inform staff that services have been cancelled for the evening, the names of the stops affected, and a reminder that all items due on that day will be renewed. This information prepares non-outreach staff members to accurately answer phone queries regarding cancellations. We also call many of our regular patrons to inform them of cancellations. Finally, we send an e-mail to our automation librarian to request due date changes for all the items checked out by the patrons whose stop has been cancelled. We have a report script that will change due dates. The script searches out all items due on a certain date and checked out through Outreach Services. The end result is that all items due on the day or night of the cancellation are renewed for two weeks.

COMMUNITY

Like any library, providing optimal levels of service and resources require an in-depth knowledge of the community it serves. For mobile library services it is especially important to have a big picture of population demographics, district topography, and housing trends. All of these aspects factor in to examining and developing our service priorities, stop selections, and driving routes.

Demographics

The TCPL Mobile Library provides service to a wide array of locations within Lafayette and Tippecanoe County with the exception of West Lafayette Public Library District and the town of Otterbein. According to STATS Indiana (n.d.), a state sponsored, web-based information service, 156,169 people live in Tippecanoe County, which is 499.8 square miles with a population density of 312.5 people per square mile. Approximately 119,821 people live in the TCPL service district. Tippecanoe County is the home of Purdue University, farms, and multiple, large manufacturing facilities. Therefore, the diversity in commerce and education reflects the diversity in our service population. Ethnic and language diversity abounds. Most notably, Tippecanoe County has become a permanent home for many Hispanic families as well as a temporary home for many international Purdue students and their families.

Topography

The landscape is primarily flat with pockets of deep valleys and steep hills cut by the Wabash River and Wildcat Creek. Snowdrifts on flatlands, flooding, and slick, sloping roads are factors that can have significant impact on our ability to deliver service and play a part in creating driving routes to new stops or making last minute adjustments when en route to or from stops.

Housing Trends

Tippecanoe County's population is increasing. New housing is especially abundant and prevalent in the south side of the county. Much of this building trend is fueled by industry location such as the Subaru plant, which recently added approximately one thousand jobs in a partnership deal with Honda. Other factors contributing to the housing growth are new roads, proximity to Interstate 65, and the expansion of city utilities. Clearly, all of these factors are interconnected. When scouting out new locations for potential stops, these housing and subsequent migration trends factor into our decisions for new stops as well as driving strategies.

SCHEDULE

The TCPL Mobile Library currently visits 36 stops every other week and five daycare stops once monthly. We have three schedules a year, summer, fall, and winter-spring. Length of stop times range from thirty minutes to two hours and fifteen minutes. The populations we serve run the gamut of the socio-economic scale but always stay within the parameters of our service priorities and stop guidelines. We visit eight outlying towns, twelve low-income and three senior housing areas, nine subdivisions, three private educational institutions, five daycares, and one workplace stop. These service point categories are in order

according to our service priorities with outlying communities as our first priority and workplace stops as our last. These service priorities are directly related to our population and geographic profile. They are essential in developing schedules and deciding what stop to add in the event of a time or route conflict.

We go out Monday through Thursday and generally begin our routes anytime between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon with the exception of Tuesday mornings, which go from 8:30-11:30. We complete our routes between 6:30 and 8:00 p.m. We visit daycares once monthly on the first three Friday mornings of the month. We rely on our *One-Minute Manual* guidelines and completed stop applications to determine the time and day for each stop and the clustering of stops for each day's run. Workplace, senior housing, daycares, and educational institutions can be scheduled for mornings or early afternoons. We generally schedule outlying communities, low-income apartments and neighborhoods, and subdivisions for late afternoon and early evenings so that people can visit after work or school. Clearly the TCPL Mobile Library Department is committed to visiting as many stops as our scheduling and staffing allow so that we can provide service to a wide range of people who both need and value the convenience. It is interesting to see that we are still providing service to some of our very first stops from forty years ago. These stops are the small towns within our county and remain our first service priority. This reminds us that Mary Titcomb's goal in 1905 to deliver public library materials to those furthest away is still relevant today.

STATISTICS/EVALUATION

In accordance with the *Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services Guidelines (2004)* (ALA's Office for Literacy, n.d.) under Section 1.4 Stops: Criteria for establishing and Maintaining Stops, it is written that, "Evaluation of the bookmobile is essential and ongoing. Schedule changes, stop length and changes, are made in response to changes in circulation and customer usage, seasonal stops, etc." (p.3). The Stop evaluation points listed in our *One-Minute Manual* provide specifics to these general recommendations. Those points are:

- Consistent usage of services
- Participation level (how many customers access the service.)
- Circulation (40 items per hour minimum) over a specified period of time
- Consistent return of materials (in good condition)
- Proximity to other stops, traditional library service, and deposit collections

We are always walking a fine line between changing the schedule in response to evaluative data and providing continuity and establishing a use pattern. Within our experience, usage can change dramatically or show ebb and flow trends over a one-year period. Therefore, one-year of data is often needed to ascertain an accurate usage pattern.

Since TCPL migrated to SIRSI, gathering and compiling mobile library usage data needed for evaluation has been an evolutionary process. User visits are easy to track. Tables for each route have been created using Excel spreadsheets. Each route's spreadsheet is divided by stop, which is further divided by age group, i.e. children, teens, and adults. There are columns provided to total the numbers for each stop, night, and month. When people enter the mobile, we simply make hash marks in the appropriate column and total as needed.

Gathering circulation statistics have required more problem solving. However, we think we have developed a generally accurate method for tracking circulation per stop. Each stop is given a code, which is usually the name of the stop. Within the patron's account, each Mobile Library user is assigned his or her appropriate stop code in two fields. These stop codes are input when we register a new patron or modify his or her present record. For those who are familiar with SIRSI Unicorn, the essential field for report generating is the *Department* field under the *Demographic* tab. We also enter the stop code in the Group ID field under the Basic tab. This enables stop identification for item holds. Our automation librarian then generates a monthly report that searches and defines circulation numbers by department (stop code). The method has some flaws. For example, we have a few patrons who use more than one stop. Also, we must be vigilant about watching for inaccurate or no stop codes and enter or modify as needed. Overall, this method has worked well and provides us with enough correct information to make sound evaluations.

MATERIALS

Our Mobile Library can house approximately five thousand items. We carry just about every type of material that is available in our main and branch libraries. While some bookmobile services have a complete and separate collection and others rely and borrow from a main library collection, we do both. Our most popular materials are purchased and stored in our department. Those materials are fiction movies for all ages, popular character and/or author picture books, and board books. We find that having these items at our fingertips and readily available streamlines our preparation time significantly because they are the highest circulating items and large quantities need replenished on a daily basis.

The rest of our materials are selected and borrowed from the main library, which is the building in which our office is located. The outreach librarian selects two to three different collections per month. Collections are changed over, or rotated in and out, every four months. For example, in the month of August, a new selection of juvenile easy readers and adult fiction will be rotated into the mobile and the current collections will be rotated out. The amount of items needed for each collection is measured in inches rather than numbers. In fact, when we finish a route and prepare a stock list of items needed for the next evening's run, we list by collection and inches needed. Each item in the newly selected collections need some database changes before they are rotated in, as do the items after they are rotated out. We change what SIRSI calls the *copy library* for each item to indicate accurate location in the online catalog.

We are always reviewing and evaluating materials statistics to better meet the needs of our patrons. Not surprisingly, movies (both DVD and VHS formats) comprise the highest percentage of overall circulations with juvenile fiction and non-fiction as the second and third highest circulating items. We recently compared collection shelf space to collection circulation and adjusted the space for each collection to better mirror usage. For example, we found that total movie circulation comprised 41% of the overall circulation but only occupied 15% of the shelf space. On the other hand, 9% of the shelf space was devoted to adult non-fiction yet this collection comprised only 3% of the overall circulation. So, we reduced the shelf space for adult non-fiction and increased shelf space for movies. We also found that our Spanish collection circulation was quite low considering the fact that we have many Spanish-speaking patrons. So, we moved the Spanish collection to a central and high profile shelving location. It is interesting to see how these simple shifts in such a small space can make a big difference.

STAFFING

The vehicle, the manual, and the materials are all elements needed to provide this important community outreach effort, but it is the dedicated and hard-working staff that, night after night, brings the elements to meaningful conclusions. The TCPL Outreach Department currently has four full-time employees, department head, outreach librarian, outreach aide, and head driver. While there are tasks and responsibilities specific to each position, there are just as many tasks that are shared equally. In such a small, intimate, and ever-changing environment, the staff champions a temperament of teamwork and excels in the art of adaptability. Above all else, TCPL's Mobile library staff strives to provide the same level of professional and

pleasant service to all patrons and thrives in an atmosphere of diversity.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Providing community outreach via mobile resources and services is a rewarding and sometimes challenging venture in public librarianship. Separating the rewards from the challenges can be difficult because the two are often inextricably linked. The challenges inherent in on-going decision-making processes necessary for each step of service and resource delivery regularly result in rewards. TCPL's commitment to provide smooth daily, monthly, and yearly operations for both patrons and staff is supported by a well-defined hierarchy of policies, procedures, and practices that require constant documentation, review, evaluation, and modification. In addition, our mobile library operations often face the challenges of maintaining a balance between customizing service needs that comply with our bi-weekly visit schedule and maintaining system standardization.

Working in mobile library services is the perfect profession for the restless, jack- or jill-of-all trades, wears-many-hats librarian. Each stop is an opening and closing of business. Each visit is a brief window of opportunity for our patrons who live down the block, across the street, or are just outside their front door to access extremely convenient library services and resources. It is an intimate, customer-driven service environment in which we learn their names and they learn ours. We have few complaints and many accolades. We uphold old memories and create new ones. When we deliver public library resources and services to our patrons' neighborhoods, backyards, parking lots, and parks, we know that we are displaying an undeniably high level of commitment to our community. Our patrons value us and we value them.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information about bookmobiles and mobile libraries, visit and explore ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services: Services to Bookmobile Communities web pages at: <http://www.ala.org/ala/olos/outreachresource/servicesbookmobile.htm>.

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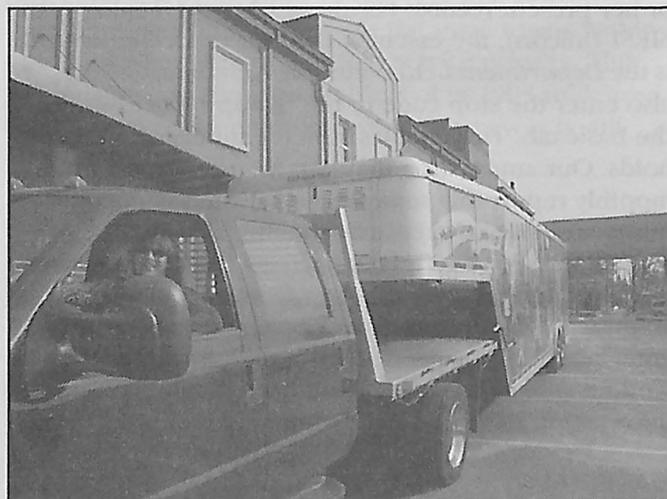
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Author and Bookmobile.