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NEBRASKA PUBLIC LIBRARY COMMISSION

The Traveling Library—What It Should Give the People as Indicated by
Nebraska's Experience.

By EDNA D. BULLOCK

The brief existence of the Nebraska public library commission has been so crowded with experiences that it ought not to be difficult to discern something of what the commission should be to Nebraska, by considering what it has been.

Although the traveling library represents but one of the many activities of this Commission, it is, perhaps, our most successful instrument in the work of library extension. The term "library extension" is interpreted to include everything from the purchasing of a book by a citizen who has no library in his home, or the substitution of a good book for a poor one on the family book shelf, to the starting of a school library in a rural school, or a public library in a village or city. Thus it

comes that this Commission is just as much interested in awakening the desire for good and useful reading in the remotest home as in encouraging the establishment and correct administration of public libraries. We believe that there is no surer way to inspire people with a desire for good books at home, at school, and in the library, than to give the people an opportunity to see and read the best books that the book trade affords. This, then, is the first task set for the traveling library—a task so magnificent in its possibilities that the accomplishment of but a small portion of it would justify the expenditure of all state funds so far devoted to this Commission, as well as affording ample satisfaction to those who have had the work in charge.

The first traveling library was sent out from the office of the State Commission in December, 1901. It went to a barber shop in Loup City, where, during the three months of its stay, 279 books were borrowed. The barber was an intelligent man, and deeply interested in the welfare of his community. He had the true library spirit. If he found a book that he thought would interest some special person, he called that person's attention to it. He read, or looked over all the books, and was able to talk about them with the borrowers. We have had many other librarians who were equally interested, and to whose intelligent and helpful spirit has been due, in a large measure, the results that justify our pride, as Nebraskans, in the achievements of the past two years. The librarians of our traveling libraries are not paid for their work as librarians, except in terms of satisfaction in being of service to others. The libraries have been kept in school houses, dwellings, stores, hotels, postoffices, depots, newspaper offices, parsonages, and a variety of other places—and the business men, ministers, teachers, and others who have served as librarians have responded loyally to the suggestions and instructions from this office. We have insisted that the use of the books must be free to all members of the community, and that all who get mail, or trade in the town are eligible as borrowers. In this way, the books have reached many remote neighborhoods. At intervals, additional suggestions go out from this office.

As soon as the finances of this

Commission will permit, someone from this office will systematically visit the places where traveling libraries are located, helping to organize local library associations, and to create interest in the books and extend their usefulness. In time, we expect to emulate the example of the Wisconsin free library commission, and hold library institutes for benefit of our traveling libraries. These are some of the things the traveling library should accomplish. It is a mistake to suppose that collections of books, however choice their selection may have been, can be live factors in education without intelligent and earnest administration. The locomotive is a magnificent creation—but it has to be manipulated with brains as well as brawn, or it is of no more use than a heap of scrap iron. The same may be said of libraries. The right book must reach the person who needs it as well as the person who wants it, if the library is to act as an educational leaven. The lump will remain a lump unless the leaven is properly distributed. We have now sixty-five traveling libraries in use, and the sixty-five librarians in charge of them have so generally caught the spirit of using the library as an educational force that we feel that the time is at hand when personal work with them will prove the efficiency of the leaven, and justify any reasonable demands that this Commission may make upon the state treasury or the generosity of the public spirited Nebraskans.

Our traveling libraries have gone to one hundred and six different places in sixty-one counties. At

this moment, they are visiting points ranging from Salem in Richardson county, around to McCook, Bridgeport, Gordon, Laurel, Alliance and Wisner. A number of them are in rural school houses or at crossroads stores. Since the first library went out, the libraries have made two hundred and twenty-six round trips, and fifty-five libraries are now out. During this time, 25,231 volumes have been borrowed. The total number of volumes is about 2,600, so that each volume has had an average circulation of nine and seven-tenths times, and the average number of borrowers at a place is fifty-one, so that the total number of different persons enrolled as borrowers is in the neighborhood of 5,400. When it is considered that most of the books borrowed have been read by several persons in addition to the borrower, it can be seen that our 2,600 books have been made good use of. Up to this time, the Commission has cost the state about \$8,000. If we had done nothing but purchase the books and administer the traveling libraries, the average cost of buying one book and circulating it nine times would be \$3.11. Anyone at all familiar with library statistics would testify that the money was well spent, providing that the books were of proper character.

A traveling library, as we make it up, contains forty volumes, one-fourth of which number are fiction for adults, and the balance are history, travel, useful arts, etc., equally divided among children and adults. Experience has proved these proportions. The fiction is most carefully selected. Each library contains

some of the old, standard novels, and some of the later, popular books. Many novels of the realistic school that could, with perfect propriety be put on the shelves of a large city library, are omitted from the traveling library. We aim to have nothing that is not wholesome in tone, and uplifting in influence, or that may not either instruct or amuse. Special attention is given to the selection of children's books, for we believe that it pays to give the boys and girls of Nebraska every possible chance. That the libraries have been appreciated could be shown by the correspondence of this office. Several small public libraries, whose income is exhausted in the expense of administration, are permanent stations for traveling libraries. This arrangement gives such libraries fresh books every three months, and so enables them to keep up interest. A permanent station is a place that has paid for one traveling library upon condition that we send a succession of libraries for five years. Harvard, Osceola, Culbertson, Douglas, Murray, Wakefield, Dannebrog, Valley Laurel and Gordon are our permanent stations. Such a station is a nucleus for a little local library. In a number of places, the traveling library has grown into a full fledged public library in an incredibly short time. The presence of the books in the community helps create the desire for more books and for a permanent collection.

We have four school traveling libraries in the hands of the county superintendents of Burt, Hamilton, Box Butte and Kimball counties. These books are being used by the

superintendents to interest teachers and pupils in school libraries, in the expectation that the establishment and better selection of school libraries will result therefrom.

Our special loan collection is part of the traveling library scheme. Any Nebraskan who finds that the resources of his own community are inadequate in any given line of study, is entitled to our assistance so far as our limited means permit. We have many books now in the hands of individuals, clubs and schools as special loans for study purposes. A wide range of subjects is covered. One man in Logan county has borrowed books on stock judging and poultry; we sent a Burt county farmer's wife books on child study and domestic topics; a Pawnee farmer had a number of books on American history; women's clubs all over the state have books on the subjects they are studying. This feature of the work is capable of indefinite extension. Indeed, if it were not for the books given to us by the Nebraska Federation of Women's Clubs, and the possibility of sometimes supplementing our resources with those of the University library, we could not do this work with the limited funds at our command. In the future, we expect to greatly extend our special loan work along practical lines, working in co-operation with the officers of farmers' institutes, women's clubs, state associations, schools and libraries, to the end that the arts of comfortable living and intelligent industry may be promoted.

A beginning of what we expect to see become a large collection on vet-

erinary, medical, technical agricultural, and related topics has been deposited in this office through the efforts of Dr. Peters, of the Nebraska experiment station. These books are deposited here to be loaned to the people of Nebraska. Any state society having a loan collection along the lines of its special interest may deposit its books with us, to be cared for and loaned to those who need them. There is no limit to what may be accomplished in this direction.

Recently a library association was formed in a school district in Otoe county, with a traveling library as a foundation for its work. The library is in a farmer's home, and, under the intelligent guidance of this man, what splendid work those forty volumes can do during the winter. If the secretary of this Commission had but the means and the time to organize similar associations all over the state, what a wonderful amount of latent possibility could be developed and directed.

The traveling library is our best appliance for promoting the mission of books—for a good book is ever its own best argument. It is the endeavor of this Commission so to use the traveling library as to encourage the public and private purchase of more and better books by the people of Nebraska. The results of the past two years are only partially tangible—as the best results of all such work can never be a matter of record. The future of this phase of the work is magnificent and inspiring, and has no limit save the boundaries of Nebraska and the provisions made by the state for forwarding the work.