
A "Splendid Service": The South Dakota Free Library Commission in the 1930s

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As the Great Depression of the 1930s bore down upon the nation, dispirited Americans increasingly turned to books as a means of escape and inspiration. In South Dakota, the distribution of reading materials to sparsely settled areas of the state, always a challenge, proved even more difficult during the economic hard times. For those who resided in remote locations, the South Dakota Free Library Commission was a lifeline. In letter after letter, thankful patrons praised the "splendid service" of the commission in providing books and information to those who lacked library access and taking the lead in developing libraries.¹ In the best of times, these tasks were demanding, and during the Great Depression they were daunting, indeed. Yet, in the face of plummeting budgets, reduced staff, and political machinations, the Free Library Commission succeeded in providing rural South Dakotans with reading material and library support, serving a welcome and vital purpose in a dark and dismal era.

The depression years were especially hard for South Dakota's large rural population. Burdened in the 1920s by sharply declining land values and farm prices, farmers were devastated in the 1930s when severe drought, dust storms, and grasshopper infestations hit the state. The grim results were crop failures, farm foreclosures, and acute population losses.² By the end of the decade, South Dakota's population

1. South Dakota, *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1934), p. 16.

2. For more on the Great Depression, see Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), pp.

had plunged by fifty thousand, and the farm populace had decreased by 21 percent. Many families were able to remain on their land only with the help of federal relief programs and payments.³

In the midst of these tribulations, library funding could hardly remain a priority. Existing libraries suffered drastic cuts, while others failed to get a start at all. By mid-decade, the state had only seventy-four public libraries, with none at all in nineteen counties. Again, farm families suffered most severely. In 1937, an estimated 85 percent of the state's rural population and 69 percent of all South Dakotans lacked access to a library.⁴ For established libraries, shrinking budgets often meant inadequate funds to replace or mend books and employment of part-time or untrained staff. School libraries, perpetually underfunded, were particularly hard hit during the depression years. "Never in the history of public education have [fewer] books been added to the libraries," wrote South Dakota's state supervisor of high schools, warning of the potential cost to students in terms of lost educational opportunity.⁵ "The rural schools are spending almost no money in the purchase of books," echoed South Dakota Free Library Commission director Leora J. Lewis, "and their meager libraries are going to pieces as a result of their constant use."⁶

277-97, and Gerald W. Wolff and Joseph H. Cash, comp. and ed., "South Dakotans Remember the Great Depression," *South Dakota History* 19 (Summer 1989): 224-58.

3. W. F. Kumlien, *Basic Trends of Social Change in South Dakota. II. Rural Life Adjustments*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 357 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1941), p. 6; U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 4:817, and *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 2:435. From 1930 to 1945, South Dakota's population decreased by almost 103,000. South Dakota, *Sixth Census of the State of South Dakota, Taken in the Year 1945* (Pierre, S.Dak.: Department of History, 1947), p. 8. See also Kumlien, *A Graphic Summary of the Relief Situation in South Dakota (1930-1935)*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 310 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1937), and Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 292.

4. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 10-11, 19. W. F. Kumlien, *Public Library Service in South Dakota*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 301 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1936), p. 7; "The Inequality of Public Library Service in South Dakota," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 23 (Mar. 1937): 4.

5. R. W. Kraushaar, "School Libraries," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 21 (June 1935): 3-4.

6. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 14.

Heavy usage was not confined to the school libraries but was, in fact, a condition experienced at all types of libraries in the early 1930s. Nationwide, even as library funding fell, the number of patrons soared. Enforced leisure, the search for job skills, a desire to become informed, and the need for escape all contributed to record numbers of library users. "Depression . . . drives them to the public libraries in multitudes, either in search of knowledge or to save their minds from despair and utter wreckage," declared library advocate John H. Dietrich of Minneapolis, Minnesota. For whatever reasons, people most certainly turned to books, and the privations of the depression ensured that borrowing became the preferred, even necessary, course for many Americans.⁷

The heightened demand was evident in South Dakota as residents clamored for books and information. From 1928 to 1933, the state's public library usage increased by 71 percent. Statistics also revealed, however, a huge disparity in library use between rural and town inhabitants. In 1930, nearly four hundred thousand persons dwelt on farms in South Dakota and many others lived in small communities, but a mere ten thousand of these rural residents managed to borrow books from public libraries.⁸

The needs of such underserved citizens had originally prompted the creation of the South Dakota Free Library Commission. The South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs (SDFWC) were the initiators, beginning a push for a centralized library agency in the early years of the twentieth century. Decrying the lack of books and promoting the benefits of education and self-improvement for all, the clubwomen pressed for legislation in 1905 to create a state-supported library com-

7. Dietrich, "A Plea for Libraries," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 19/20 (Dec. 1933/Mar. 1934): 4. Based on statistics from thirty-three cities, library circulation nationwide increased an estimated 37 percent from 1929 to 1932, even as book production declined significantly. "Increase in Reading since 1929," *Library Journal* 58 (15 Jan. 1933): 77; Douglas Waples, *Research Memorandum on Social Aspects of Reading in the Depression* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1937), pp. 10, 59-60.

8. Leora J. Lewis, "Public Library Situation," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 20 (June/Sept. 1934): 29; *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1930), pp. 12-13. In 1930, 561,942 (81.1 percent) of South Dakota's 692,849 inhabitants lived on farms or in rural communities. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*, 4:817.

mission. When their bill failed to pass, the women organized their own limited library network, sending out cases of books to selected communities. In 1906, the newly formed South Dakota Library Association (SDLA) entered the campaign, actively working toward passage of library legislation.⁹

The joint lobbying efforts paid off in 1913 when the South Dakota State Legislature created and appropriated funds for the Free Library Commission. The commission, whose members comprised the governor, superintendent of public instruction, state historian, and one representative each from the SDFWC and SDLA, functioned as a state agency. Under the law, the superintendent of public instruction served as president and the state historian as secretary. The legislation also set forth the principal duties for the commission. They included supervising and selecting materials for the state library, which until that time had been overseen by the state historian; sending collections of books and other materials to public libraries, schools, clubs, communities, charitable and penal institutions, and individuals requesting such service; compiling an annual list from which county library boards could select books for school libraries; and assisting and encouraging communities to establish public libraries. The law required the commission to present a record of its activities in a biennial report to the governor.¹⁰

For its first year of operation, the Free Library Commission received three thousand dollars and space "meagerly equipped with a tiny book collection, one small desk and two book stacks" in the office of the De-

9. The 1905 bill, modeled on Minnesota's successful legislation, was spearheaded by Stella Marie Stutenroth of Watertown, the federation's legislative committee chair. Minutes, South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, June 1904, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre; "Commission History," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 11 (Mar.-June 1925): 5-6; *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 5. For more on the role of the SDLA, see Julia Concannon, "Library Organization in South Dakota," in *Proceedings of the Twenty-fourth Annual Session of the South Dakota Educational Association Held at Sioux Falls, December 26-27-28, 1906*, pp. 245-48; Letitia Stormo and Dorette Darling, "The South Dakota Library Association," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1980), 28:279; South Dakota, *Ninth Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (1908), p. 355, and *Eleventh Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction* (1912), pp. 379-82.

10. South Dakota, *Session Laws* (1913), chap. 217, sec. 1-16, pp. 300-303.



For a brief time, the Free Library Commission operated from this small office in the state capitol. Doane Robinson, state historian and commission secretary, is seated at the desk.

partment of History in the state capitol building in Pierre.¹¹ The agency soon relocated to separate quarters in the capitol, and then, due to overcrowding, occupied rooms in a state-rented building in downtown Pierre. One month after the move, in January 1925, a fire swept through the downtown building, resulting in water damage to eight thousand volumes and forcing the commission to suspend work for several months. After inhabiting various other locations throughout Pierre, the commission moved back to the capitol in 1932, taking up quarters in the newly built annex.¹²

11. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 5. The book collection in 1913 totaled 6,124 volumes: 2,264 from the State Department of Education, 299 from the SDFWC, 55 from the State Department of History, and 3,506 purchased volumes. *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1914), pp. 4-5.

12. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 5; "Library Commission Suffers from Fire," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 10 (Dec. 1924): 58-59; *Seventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1926), p. 4.

From the beginning, politics and finances intertwined in the life of the commission. Dependent upon the state for its existence and funding, the agency was inevitably enmeshed in the political process. Commission secretary Doane Robinson demonstrated awareness of the political realities in his introduction to the first biennial report. Testifying to the value of the library service while highlighting the need for more funds, Robinson appealed to the egos of the lawmakers, paying tribute to their wisdom in passing the legislation and extolling "the great popularity of their action."¹³

The South Dakota Free Library Commission operated under the direction of a field librarian, following the model of surrounding states. In a booklet adopted for use by the League of Library Commissions, Edna D. Bullock described the promotional work of the field librarian as requiring "tireless energy, intimate acquaintance with conditions and people, an uncommon degree of inventive genius, and a thorough knowledge of the principles of advertising." Observing that the communities most in need of books were often the last to find out that there were books to be had, she advised field workers to visit all remote areas of a state systematically to spread the word. In the face of such a "stupendous task," she acknowledged, "the field worker whose field is a whole state, and that a large one, may well stand aghast."¹⁴ Adding to the commission's daunting workload were the time-consuming tasks of selecting and processing books; sending them out on loan and repairing them upon return; assisting in the organization and operation of new libraries; publishing a state library bulletin and other materials; and unending correspondence and recordkeeping.

South Dakota's field librarians gamely took on the challenge, serving as staunch library promoters and advocates for access. Working virtually unaided at first, the director by 1930 headed a staff of four, consisting of a reference librarian, cataloger and clerk, assistant in charge of traveling libraries, and stenographer. The commission's first

13. *First Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 5.

14. Edna D. Bullock, *Management of Traveling Libraries* (Boston: ALA Publishing Board, 1907), p. 6.

leader was Lilly M. E. Borresen, an adept organizer and unflagging publicist for the commission's services. Following in her steps were Lois A. Spencer, who remained a strong voice for South Dakota libraries well after her short tenure as commission director, and Julia C. Stockett, who helped lead the campaign for books and funds for military camp libraries during World War I and later supervised the American Library Association's Border Traveling Library Service. Guiding the commission through the 1920s and 1930s were Leora J. Lewis and her successor, Celeste E. Barnes.¹⁵

Despite their professional skills, the commission directors could not elude the vagaries of state politics. In January 1935, Director Lewis was discharged after sixteen years of dedicated leadership. Her dismissal followed a change in party leadership in the state, Democrat Tom Berry having replaced Republican Governor Warren Green in the previous election. Lewis's ouster evoked a storm of protest. "We have always prided ourselves," asserted the president of SDLA in a letter to Governor Berry, "that the department at Pierre, representing our library profession, remained, as it well should be, untrammled by politics—for politics can have no effect on the efficiency of such a librarian and leader as Leora J. Lewis has in every phase of her work shown herself to be."¹⁶ The Rapid City Teachers Association drafted a resolution calling for the removal of politics from education,¹⁷ and one library patron, "filled with indignation," wrote to the local newspaper editor to object to the machinations of politicians. "I am not ac-

15. The title of field librarian was changed to director in 1929. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 10. For more on the directors' activities, see *Biennial Reports of the South Dakota Free Library Commission, 1914-1940; 50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission and Histories of South Dakota Libraries by Their Librarians, 1913-1963* [Pierre: South Dakota State Library Commission, 1973], pp. 6-7; Lois Spencer Severin, "Library Planning in South Dakota," *Library Journal* 60 (1 May 1935): 384-85; Severin, "Equalizing Library Opportunities in South Dakota," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 23 (Dec. 1937): 48-51; and William H. Powers, "South Dakota's Contribution to Library War Service," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 10 (1920): 249, 258.

16. Loraine Vilas to Governor Tom Berry, Jan. 1935, quoted in *Watertown Herald*, 10 Jan. 1935, Lawrence Fox Papers, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society.

17. Rapid City Teachers Association to Lawrence Fox, 8 Jan. 1935, *ibid.*

quainted with either Miss Lewis or her successor, so do not speak as a friend. But anyone who ever sat in Miss Lewis's audience could not have failed to have been inspired," the letter writer declared, accusing the Democrats of political "pettiness."¹⁸ The protests went unheeded, however, and Celeste Barnes, supervisor of the Federal Adult Education Program for South Dakota, replaced Lewis as director.¹⁹

The commission's course was perennially linked to both politics and economics. In 1927, the commission had sustained its first substantial cut in funding, after surviving a motion to abolish the department altogether. Support for the library service remained essentially strong, however, and many legislators came to its defense. The next five years brought small budget increases, but the onslaught of the Great Depression abruptly ended this trend.²⁰

Throughout the 1930s, the commission's task became ever more difficult as appropriations declined precipitously and demand for services rose. In 1933, the commission suffered a 22 percent reduction in funds, which tumbled from \$12,750 to \$9,900, with \$200 taken from the director's salary, \$1,380 from the office salary fund, \$900 from the book fund, and \$370 from the fund for travel and office maintenance. The downward spiral continued, reaching a low of \$8,000 appropriated for 1939–1940.²¹

Although hampered by inadequate resources and staff, the commission personnel nevertheless remained keenly aware of the imperativeness of their mission. "The Free Library Commission must carry on, going forward with this service which is so vitally necessary to the education, culture and happiness of the people of this state," intoned the *South Dakota Library Bulletin*. As the depression intensified, the

18. Unidentified newspaper clipping, *ibid*.

19. Minutes, South Dakota Free Library Commission, 4 Jan. 1935, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society.

20. "Commission Appropriation Reduced," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 13 (June 1927): 22–23; "Commission Appropriation Increased," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 14/15 (Dec. 1928/Mar. 1929): 2.

21. "Commission Appropriation Reduced," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 18/19 (Dec. 1932/Mar. 1933): 2; *Fourteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1940), p. 15.

commission focused on its "most important duty"—getting books to those who lacked them.²²

The commission employed three methods for distributing reading materials to South Dakotans: traveling libraries, school collections, and individual loans. Popularized by New York State Librarian Melvil Dewey in the early 1890s, traveling libraries, or rotating collections of books sent out to rural communities, quickly spread throughout the nation. By the end of World War I, however, the need for traveling library services had subsided in many states as local libraries and bookmobiles became commonplace. But in sparsely settled South Dakota, the service continued to prevail until the mid-1930s as the primary means of serving remote rural populations. The book collections, ranging from twenty to seventy volumes, were typically loaned to communities for six months and were housed variously in farmhouses, post offices, schools, churches, and stores. At first sending out only fixed collections of books, the commission switched to a more flexible system in the mid-1920s that allowed for the selection of specific books to meet individual reading tastes.²³

During the depression, the circulation of traveling library collections increased significantly, escalating by 76 percent from 1929 to 1934.²⁴ Grateful readers wrote in to voice their satisfaction. "Please accept my hearty thanks for the splendid service which you have rendered to me this winter," wrote one rural resident. "I honestly do not know what I would do if it were not for the library facilities available at Pierre." "Hurrah for the South Dakota Free Library Commission," chorused another satisfied patron. "It has surely saved the day for me in these days when I can't buy books or get to a library." Learning of

22. "South Dakota Free Library Commission, 1914-1936," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 23 (Mar. 1937): 3. See also *Twelfth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1936), p. 5.

23. Joanne E. Passet, "Reaching the Rural Reader: Traveling Libraries in America, 1892-1920," *Libraries & Culture* 26 (Winter 1991): 100-118; *Twelfth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 16; "New Traveling Library Plan," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 11 (Dec. 1925): 46.

24. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 6.

impending funding cuts, a concerned reader expressed her dismay. "Some people are not wise enough," she wrote, "to see that in these times of adversity and depression, poor people who suffer hunger, lack of clothing, and other discomforts and sorrows, ought not also to be deprived of the consolation and cheer of good books and magazines." Reading, she noted, helped to "take their minds off of their miseries and enable them to endure more bravely."²⁵

Stella Page Day, whose farmhouse served as a traveling library station, described how one young woman whose home lacked "a single book or magazine" donned her father's hip boots and hiked through the snow to the Day farm to borrow books. Day proudly noted that her own sons had grown up loving books as a result of the traveling libraries and that her husband read voraciously, as well.²⁶ Indeed, all members of a household frequently enjoyed selections chosen from the traveling library. "The people here have received the library most enthusiastically and usually a book in the home made the rounds of all in the family or else was read aloud in the family circle," read a characteristic letter. "This was especially true of the children's books."²⁷

Through the lending of collections to schools, the Free Library Commission carried out its mandate to supply children with books. The commission had always included juvenile books in its traveling library collections, but as rural school libraries struggled, it devoted a progressively larger portion of resources to supplementing the paltry school collections.²⁸ The commission recognized, however, that "the demand for books by the rural schools of South Dakota will always exceed the supply" and was compelled to limit the number of books it sent out.²⁹ In the mid-1930s, it raised the number of books individual schools could borrow within a two-month period from ten to twenty-five. When all available collections had been distributed, schools were placed on a waiting list. Commission staff also compiled lists of book

25. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

26. Day, "What the Free Library Means to Us," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (Sept. 1938): 37-38.

27. *Eighth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1928), p. 17.

28. *Tenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1932), p. 15.

29. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 7.

titles recommended for school libraries and provided reference material to students and teachers.³⁰

"If there exists any doubt on the part of anyone in the state as to the need of a state book lending agency," declared commission director Leora Lewis, "it should be dispelled by a half hour's examination of the file which contains the letters written to the Free Library Commission by the rural teachers of South Dakota."³¹ One teacher who wrote to express her delight at receiving books characterized her school library as "very limited, with no new volumes at all."³² Lamented another applicant, "The school library has but seven books."³³ One appreciative teacher wrote to thank the commission and had her students do so, as well. "The children like the books always, but this time they pounced upon them with shouts of joy," she enthused. "What I want to know is when will teacher get to read them?" A sixth-grade pupil declared, "I sure like the book Chi-wee. I had much pleasure reading it." A second grader confided, "I like the book of the little red-hen, the cock and the mouse," while a first grader offered a succinct, "I like the books."³⁴

School collections, too, were shared among family members. A teacher returning a shipment of books related how one man in the community had devoured all of the volumes his young son had borrowed, never having had the opportunity to do much reading when he was a boy.³⁵

The commission provided additional student outreach by supplying reading material to organizations, such as the book club formed in the small town of Kennebec. Members of the club, composed of seventeen high-school students and their English teacher, agreed to read at least one book a month. Because the community had no library facilities, the group appealed to the Free Library Commission. Director Lewis made the book selections, incorporating occasional suggestions from

30. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 5; *Twelfth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 5, 13.

31. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 4-5.

32. *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1938), p. 14.

33. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 17.

34. *Twelfth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 14.

35. *Seventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 16-17.

club members, and sent out three groups of twenty-five books during the course of the year. Among the selections were Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Elizabeth Cooper's *My Lady of the Chinese Courtyard*, Ole E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The club proved so popular, reported a delighted Lewis, that some graduating seniors asked to read the books sent to the next year's club after the regular members had made their selections.³⁶

Meanwhile, adult readers' specific requests were increasingly accommodated through the commission's individualized loan service. By 1934, nearly half of all book loans (36,254 out of a total of 79,609 volumes) were made through direct mail.³⁷ Lewis considered this service "possibly the most appreciated and the most nearly indispensable part of the Commission work," describing the wide array of requests received daily for materials for individual study, club work, or recreational reading. Throughout the 1930s, the total number of books loaned rose steadily, almost doubling between 1930 and 1940.³⁸

The individualized loan service met a wide variety of information needs and interests. "Will you please send me a good authority on the culture of bees?" appealed an anxious apiculturist. "I have one stand which seems weak or sick, do[es] not produce much honey, and a friend wrote you and you sent him a splendid treatise which he recommended to me." Another recipient thanked the commission for material received on the "Farm Relief question."³⁹

Even with its resources limited, the staff remained committed to its mission of public library development, regularly visiting communities and offering organizational assistance. A few town libraries did make a start in the 1930s, including Eagle Butte, Kennebec, and Volin, all begun with a nucleus of books borrowed from the Free Library Commission. Housed in stores, back rooms, and any other available space,

36. Lewis, "Book Clubs for High Schools," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 17 (June 1931): 41-43.

37. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 7, 19.

38. *Tenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 6. From 1930 to 1940, individual book loans rose from 47,204 to 91,374. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 20; *Fourteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 12.

39. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 15.

these rudimentary libraries managed to hang on through the depression, eventually acquiring buildings of their own.⁴⁰

As yet another means of assuring book service to the state's rural families, the commission had long worked to establish county libraries, a movement that gained momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century. Between 1920 and 1930, the tally of county libraries nationwide jumped from 99 to 225, with California and New Jersey leading in the number of county library systems. In South Dakota, four county libraries—Hyde, Tripp, Potter, and Buffalo—were organized during the 1920s.⁴¹ Modeled on the traveling library concept, these libraries operated from a central distributing point, often the courthouse, with stations or branches scattered throughout the county. "Instead of the people going to the library headquarters, the li-

40. The Eagle Butte library began in 1931, and the Kennebec and Volin libraries were established in 1934. "Eagle Butte Library," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 23 (June 1937): 18; 50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission, pp. 29-30, 41, 72-73.

41. Edmund de S. Brunner and Irving Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), pp. 204-5; Kumlien, *Public Library Service in South Dakota*, p. 18. Laws passed in 1917 and 1921 facilitated the establishment of county libraries in South Dakota. See *South Dakota, Session Laws* (1917), chap. 293, sec. 1-7, pp. 603-5, and (1921), chap. 163, sec. 1-8, pp. 260-62. The Buffalo County Library was established primarily to serve rural schools.



The Eagle Butte library was founded in the 1930s through the determined efforts of the Dakota Women's Club and the Free Library Commission.

brary goes out to the people," stated library supporter and South Dakota State College sociology professor Wendell F. Kumlien. Book collections were placed in strategic locations, including post offices, creameries, churches, schools, and private residences.⁴²

The Hyde County library was headquartered in Highmore, with deposit stations in farm homes, post offices, and the hotel in Holabird. "Outside each one you will see a bright blue and orange sign painted on a piece of tin, announcing that books are to be had within for the asking," reported *Farmer's Wife* magazine. In an article featuring the station at the H. P. Richardson farm, the magazine noted that local families visited three times a week for "mail, library books and a tank of gas for the automobile. In the winter it is nothing uncommon for them to bring three or four of the same books back, next mail day, read through."⁴³

42. Kumlien, *Equalizing Library Opportunities in South Dakota*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 233 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1928), p. 24. See also Lewis, "Organizing a County Library," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 9 (June 1923): 34-40.

43. Quoted in "Hyde County Library Receives Publicity," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 15 (Dec. 1929): 63.



A Hyde County farmer receives a collection of books from one of the library deposit stations scattered throughout rural South Dakota.

The efforts to equalize library opportunities for rural and town residents in Hyde, Tripp, Potter, and Buffalo counties proved markedly successful, with over half the borrowers coming from the countryside. Despite these encouraging results and the commission's extensive promotional efforts, the economic exigencies of the depression halted the development of any more county libraries in the state during the 1930s. The four existing libraries themselves were barely able to survive. The Hyde and Potter county libraries suffered cuts of 81 and 77 percent, respectively, from 1930 to 1938.⁴⁴

Commission members had hoped that a county library system would help to ease the workload on its own short-staffed office, but these hopes were not to be realized. Instead, the lack of funding for county, town, and school libraries added to its burden. "The South Dakota Free Library Commission has been forced throughout the entire depression to meet a constantly increasing demand for books on the part of the public for which its book resources and staff were entirely inadequate," attested director Lewis in 1934.⁴⁵

The commission looked next to alternative approaches for expanding book access to rural South Dakotans. In March 1938, the agency collaborated with the South Dakota Congress of Parents and Teachers to launch the state's first bookmobile. Built by Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers, the "library on wheels" resembled a "medium-sized moving van" painted black and cream and sporting a red, white, and blue WPA sign. The bookmobile's territory encompassed Sully, Potter, Walworth, Edmunds, McPherson, Corson, Perkins, and Harding counties in central and northwestern South Dakota.⁴⁶ Gertrude Flyte, president of the state Parents and Teachers Congress, to-

44. Biennial Reports of the South Dakota Free Library Commission, 1926-1940; *Thirteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 12-13. See also Kumlien, *Equalizing Library Opportunities*, pp. 9, 20; *Reading in the Home: The Novel—Second Year*, South Dakota State College Extension Service, Extension Circular no. 311 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1931), p. 10. County library development did continue, albeit slowly. By 1954, South Dakota had seven county libraries. Michael Jackley, "The Organization and Functions of the South Dakota State Library Commission," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 51 (Aug. 1965): 103.

45. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 6.

46. "Bookmobile Starts Rounds March 16," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (Mar. 1938): 7.

gether with driver Edward Casey, a Mitchell youth, accompanied the truck on its inaugural voyage. Library Commission director Celeste Barnes selected the truck's stock of one thousand volumes, including fiction and "thrilling adventure books," aiming to appeal to varied ages and interests.⁴⁷

The service was a decided success. Borrowers flocked to the book truck, rapidly exhausting its supply and obliging a swift return to Pierre to appeal for more books and monetary donations. Fortunately, the commission managed to round up enough additional volumes to enable the bookmobile to resume its monthly excursions. Demand for reading materials continued to rise, particularly during the winter when travel could prove most challenging.⁴⁸ Barnes recalled making one memorable trip to Meadow in Perkins County in a snowstorm. The journey culminated with a snowplow leading a procession of "a beer truck, a gas wagon, a coal truck and [the] Bookmobile" into town.⁴⁹

Continually striving to seek out and accommodate those in need of reading materials, the commission also dispatched books to various groups in the depression years. It circulated traveling libraries among Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps, transient camps, rehabilitation camps, and recreation centers under the WPA and its subsidiary agency, the National Youth Administration (NYA). WPA and NYA workers, in turn, assisted the commission, performing book mending and other routine tasks, thus allowing the understaffed agency to carry on its essential work.⁵⁰

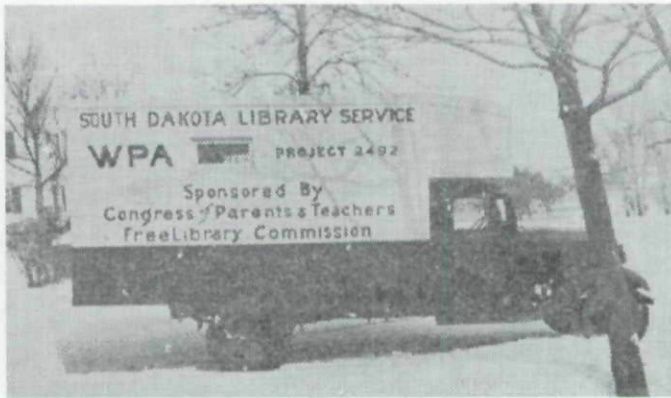
The commission's extension service even reached behind the walls of the South Dakota State Penitentiary. Every six months, staff sent

47. "Book Service for South Dakota," *Dakota Farmer*, 23 Apr. 1938, p. 193. See also "Bookmobile Makes Initial Appearance," *South Dakota Parent-Teacher Magazine* 11 (Mar./Apr. 1938): 10–11. By December 1938, the bookmobile's collection had grown to two thousand volumes, seventeen hundred of them from the Free Library Commission. "Report of the Free Library Commission," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (Dec. 1938): 50.

48. "Book Service for South Dakota," p. 193.

49. "Library Service," *South Dakota Parent-Teacher* 12 (Mar./Apr. 1939): 4. The WPA discontinued the bookmobile on 1 November 1939. Mercedes B. MacKay, South Dakota Library Commission Report, [1940], Lawrence Fox Papers.

50. *Twelfth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, pp. 5, 7; MacKay, South Dakota Library Commission Report.



The bookmobile, constructed from a Chevrolet truck chassis and lumber from a dismantled school, made its initial appearance in March 1938.

fifty volumes to supplement the prison library's own limited but heavily used collection. The books were eagerly received and "in constant demand," reported the inmate-run journal, the *Messenger*.⁵¹ "The circulating library gives a little variety and adds considerabl[y] to the interest in the library department on the part of inmates who seem to have pretty thoroughly covered the catalog of books."⁵² The prisoners' tastes leaned heavily toward fiction, with western authors Zane Grey, Emerson Hough, and Charles Alden Seltzer and Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs reported as favorites. Frank George Carpenter's travel books also proved popular, as did biographies and books focusing on war and battles.⁵³

The most extensive reading project initiated during the Great Depression targeted South Dakota farm women. In 1929, the South Dakota Free Library Commission and the Extension Department of South Dakota State College collaborated to pioneer the Reading in the Home program. Facilitated through the state's home extension clubs, the project aimed to increase reading among rural women and their

51. "Library Notes," *Messenger* 12 (Feb. 1930): 21.

52. Will Altman, "Library Notes and Book Reviews," *Messenger* 11 (Nov. 1928): 35.

53. "Prisoners Read," *Messenger* 21 (Sept. 1937): 6.

families. Extension specialist Mary Dolve and library commission director Lewis initially administered the program. They were succeeded in 1934 and 1935, respectively, by state home demonstration leader Nora Hott and commission director Barnes. The number of women enrolled in home extension clubs fluctuated during the depression years, with the 1930 member count of 10,439 falling to 9,079 in 1933 and then soaring to 18,399 by 1936.⁵⁴ The reading project was among the most popular offerings and continued into the following decades.

Each year's program centered on a theme. The library commission director compiled and provided home extension club members with a topical guide listing suggested books and conducted numerous training sessions for reading leaders. Club members were encouraged to contact the commission for books or borrow them from their local or county libraries. Among the selected reading themes were "Reading for All the Family" in 1930, "The Novel" in 1931, "Knowing America through Books" in 1932, "Knowing Other Countries through Books" in 1933, "Books of Pioneer Life" in 1934, "Biography" in 1935 and 1936, and "As You Like It," a mix of titles, in 1937.⁵⁵

Club members attested to the program's appeal. A Turner County woman described her introduction to the world of books as a transformative experience. "I used to feel that reading was a waste of time and should only be done when everything else was done, and of course, that never happens," she explained. Participating in her home extension club's reading program profoundly altered her views. "Now I feel as if it is part of my work to read good books."⁵⁶ A member of Brown County's Happy Hour home extension club reported reading an entire book for the first time in her life, while avid reader Bernice Smiley

54. Nora M. Hott, "S. D. Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, 28 Mar. 1936, p. 171; Gilbert S. Weaver, *Twenty-five Years of Agricultural Extension Work in South Dakota*, South Dakota Agricultural Extension Service, Mimeograph Circular no. 223 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, [1937]), pp. 44-45. According to one brief biography of Leora Lewis, the Reading in the Home project served as a model for other states. "Honor Roll of Native Born South Dakotans," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 22 (1946): 222.

55. "Library Commission," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 22 (Mar. 1936): 2; Hott, "S. D. Home Extension News," pp. 171-72; Weaver, *Twenty-five Years of Agricultural Extension Work in South Dakota*, p. 57.

56. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 9.

S. Dak. State Colleg

Reading in the Home

The Novel--Second Year



Books provide home recreation

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE COLLEGE
EXTENSION SERVICE
C. Larsen, Director
Brookings, S. D.

The innovative Reading in the Home project targeted rural women and their families. Annual circulars like this one listed recommended titles and provided borrowing information.

of Mount Vernon, South Dakota, lauded the project as both a joy and an education.⁵⁷

Project leaders encouraged members' families to read as well, providing titles appropriate to different age groups and interests. The project clearly increased reading opportunities for many farm women

57. Nora M. Hott, "S. D. Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, 31 Aug. 1935, p. 323; *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 9.

and their families. Statistics for 1939 revealed that family members read 49,276 books as a result of the program.⁵⁸

The reading choices of any recipient of the Free Library Commission's services depended ultimately upon the book selections the commission made. These selections were shaped by contemporary attitudes and values and by an ongoing debate over what should be read and why. The explosion of mass-produced fiction in late nineteenth-century America coincided with the rise of the modern public library movement, bringing to the fore the issue of what was appropriate for libraries to provide. Reading, experts widely believed, should serve an educational, cultural, and moral purpose. Popular fiction was thus suspect, viewed as threatening to undermine librarians' endeavors to guide and elevate reading habits. "Weak and flabby and silly books tend to make weak and flabby and silly brains," scoffed former Librarian of Congress Ainsworth Rand Spofford in 1900.⁵⁹

As the twentieth century unfolded, however, the drive to control moral and literary standards was gradually replaced by a commitment to meet the interests of readers. One factor contributing to this shift in attitudes was the waning of the progressivist emphasis on moral renewal and reform. Another was the experience of World War I and the wide distribution of popular reading material to soldiers. Also contributing to the tempered mindset was a recognition that popular fiction was here to stay.⁶⁰

Reflective of the changing times, New York University journalism professor Leon Whipple upheld the value of reading for emotional sat-

58. Nora M. Hott, "Home Extension Club Members Make Use of Library Service," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 26 (Mar. 1940): 2.

59. Spofford, *A Book For All Readers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), p. 19. See also Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 129-44; Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 67-87; Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876-1900* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1965), pp. 12-31.

60. "By the 1920s," writes library historian Wayne A. Wiegand, "librarians generally came to accept that the 'light' reading they had disparaged for the past half-century fell somewhere between 'good' and 'bad,' and was at most 'harmless'" (Wiegand, "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots: What the Past Tells Us about the Present: Reflections on the Twentieth-Century History of American Librarianship," *Library Quarterly* 69 (Jan. 1999): 9).

isfaction and the right of individuals to judge for themselves the type of reading that best suited them. "All human beings need at times to escape from the serious situation in which they find themselves," he enjoined, "often just for the joy ride, at times for sanity. . . . People will enjoy vicarious experience, and who shall say that vicarious experience is not better than no experience—and a spring of growth?" Noting that readers "will revel in sensationalism," he concluded, "perhaps they need the right kinds to keep them awake, percipient, and convinced that life is enough worth while to justify washing the dishes 1,095 times a year for fifty years."⁶¹

The onset of the Great Depression revived the issue of the kinds of books libraries should promote, generating extensive discussion in the library literature. Budget cuts and burgeoning use constrained librarians to review book selection policies carefully and consider the question of what would best serve the increasing numbers of readers.⁶² As budgets fell in South Dakota in the 1930s, the Free Library Commission and the state's libraries grappled with selection decisions. Policies on books for children tended to be much stricter than those for adults. Even so, moral and literary considerations factored into the selection process for adults, as evidenced by statements from various South Dakota librarians who advocated wholesome literature or bemoaned the public's taste for mediocre books. The general consensus, however, was to set personal biases aside and select books that would be read.⁶³

The South Dakota Free Library Commission essentially followed this practice, providing patrons with what they wanted within financial limits. The measures of successful book buying, emphasized commission director Lewis, did not lie in the number of books purchased but in the percentage of volumes actively read. She recommended that librarians promptly purchase books that were well re-

61. Whipple, "Why People Read," *Journal of Adult Education* 10 (June 1938): 244-45.

62. Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1900-1950* (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited), p. 6.

63. Ethel Jacobsen, "A Few Book Notes," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 15 (June 1929): 34; Caroline Orvis, "Censorship of Fiction in the Public Library," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 16 (Mar. 1930): 11.

viewed and in high demand, singling out Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* and Edna Ferber's *American Beauty* as examples of outstanding popular fiction. Lewis counseled delay, however, in buying westerns, mysteries, most travel books, and some works of light fiction, until lower-priced editions became available. Hastening to distance herself from charges of "intellectual snobbery," she explained that while a novel such as *The Good Earth* was asked for "specifically by title and no other book can take its place," patrons seldom requested any particular title by Zane Grey or William MacLeod Raine but, rather, asked for "something" by one of those authors or simply for a good western story.⁶⁴

The commission strove to keep informed about what readers wanted. Lewis, acknowledging the value of consulting critics and authorities when making book selection decisions, stressed the need, above all, to be familiar with and responsive to the tastes of patrons. "[We can] keep our ear a little closer to the ground perhaps," she suggested, and "try to develop a little more fully that sixth sense which good librarians must have which tells them what the public is apt to want."⁶⁵ The Free Library Commission regularly printed lists of its popular books in the *South Dakota Library Bulletin*. Fiction titles in demand in June 1936 included Bess Streeter Aldrich's *Spring Comes on Forever*, Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *North to the Orient*, and Charles Nordhoff's *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Among the popular nonfiction titles were foreign correspondent Negley Farson's *The Way of a Transgressor*, Arthur Kallet and F. J. Schlink's bestselling 100,000,000 *Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs, and Cosmetics*, and Nebraska author Mari Sandoz's biography of her father, *Old Jules*.⁶⁶

64. Lewis, "Making the Most of a Scanty Budget," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 18 (Mar. 1932): 14-15. The commission did state its intention to exclude the "extreme type of book over which there might be controversy" in its Reading in the Home selections ("Extension Club Book Program," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 19 [June/Sept. 1933]: 18).

65. Lewis, "Libraries and Business Methods," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 12 (June 1926): 36. For book selection tools, Lewis recommended the ALA's *Booklist* and the *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* as essential. She also found useful the *Retail Bookseller*, the *Wilson Bulletin*, and various book journals, her favorite being the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Lewis, "Making the Most of a Scanty Budget," p. 15.

66. "Popular Books at the Library Commission," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 22 (June 1936): 26.

The attention the commission paid to readers' interests drew a highly positive response. While minor complaints occasionally arose, as illustrated by one bookmobile customer's desire for more or newer books,⁶⁷ most rural readers reacted to the commission's selections with enthusiasm and satisfaction. Numerous letters expressed delight with the choice of books, calling them "quite ideal"⁶⁸ and "just what we need."⁶⁹ Whether they were inspired by the message of endurance in pioneer novels, given a chance to escape through the pages of a western or adventure story, or provided with intellectual stimulation from material for club or school work, patrons of the South Dakota Free Library Commission's book services testified to the commission's vital function. In the midst of the depression, the opportunity to read was a cherished respite from what a Mellette County farm woman described as the "dreary succession of hopelessness and monotony that bore down on our courage and hope."⁷⁰

While times slowly improved in the late 1930s, funding for the South Dakota Free Library Commission did not begin to rebound until the early years of the next decade. Even then, the agency struggled with limited funding. In 1943, the commission's title was officially changed to the State Library. The agency continued to work steadily toward, and eventually saw the fruits of, its goal of expanding local library services. Looking back at the bleak depression years, the value of the service the commission performed is clear. At an exceptionally discouraging time, it was able to marshal its own meager resources and provide sustenance to many book-hungry South Dakotans.⁷¹

67. "Library Service," p. 4.

68. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 11. See also *Eighth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 17.

69. *Tenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, p. 16.

70. Rose Tomsik Van Schaack, *A Time Remembered: Memoirs of a Prairie Wife* (Mesa, Ariz.: By the Author, 1987), p. 192.

71. *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (1942), p. 13; *South Dakota, Session Laws* (1943), chap. 111, sec. 3-4, p. 118. The Library Services Act of 1956 provided federal funds for extending library service to rural areas, allowing for the development of regional libraries in South Dakota. *Twenty-second and Twenty-third Biennial Report of the South Dakota State Library Commission* (1958), pp. 4-6.

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