

# **We Had Done Wonderfully Well . . . Considering: Madison County's Odyssey from Bookmobile to Public Library**

by Pauline Binkley Cheek

"The story of extension library work in the mountains," says Alfred H. Perrin, "is an interesting but as yet largely un-researched topic."<sup>1</sup> A study of such work in Madison County, North Carolina, must be made in the context of the cultural and economic life of the region. Little more than two decades ago Madison County was without public library service of any kind. Although North Carolina had long placed a high priority on public libraries and, as early as 1923, had begun bookmobile service in Durham County, the inhabitants of Madison, isolated geographically by rugged mountain and unimproved roads, were further hampered by their lack of cash income, their generally low educational level, and the unavailability of books. They did have a regard for books, however, as evidenced by the fact that people treasured old volumes passed down from generation to generation and by the willingness with which whole families sacrificed to enable a child to further his education. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1955 when the Home Demonstration Club received a prize from *THE PROGRESSIVE FARMER*

the ladies voted to contribute the \$25.00 award toward the establishment of a county library.

As an impetus for the formulation of such libraries, the State Library Commission has, since the 1940's, offered state aid to any county able to appropriate local funds for a library program. In response to this challenge the ladies stumped the county in a house-to-house campaign to raise the \$3,344.00 necessary to qualify the county for a basic grant in state aid. Accordingly, on July 20, 1955, the Madison County Public Library officially came into being. With the purchase of a 1947 Chevrolet truck to serve as bookmobile and with the hiring of Mrs. Peggy Dotterer to operate the service, Madison County became the ninety-fourth county in the state to make available to its rural citizens the entertainment and enlightenment of books.<sup>2</sup>

In 1957 and for many years thereafter the Library Board had to request a waiver of the state requirement that a professional librarian be employed to administer state funds. No professional librarian, however, could have been more

solicitous of the library's welfare than was Mrs. Dotterer, who refers to the library as "my baby." Indeed, she has lavished upon it the patience and prodding, the pride and exasperation, the nourishment and loving care which go into the rearing of any child. The story of the Madison County Public Library is in large measure, therefore, the story of Elizabeth Baker Dotterer, better known as Peggy.

The granddaughter of Col. James H. Rumbough who left Greenville, Tennessee in 1862 in search of a safer place for his family during the War Between the States and who purchased what is now the entire town of Hot Springs south of the French Broad River, Peggy has roots deeply enmeshed in her native community. "I was the kind of girl," she says, "who would get on her horse and ride out to be gone all day, eating dinner and visiting with one family or another."<sup>3</sup>

At the same time Peggy refused to be enslaved by allegiance to any job or locality. Upon graduation from the Dudley Allen Sargent School of Physical Education, now a part of Boston University, she taught physical education in various parts of the country until she realized that her lack of competitive spirit made her unfit for this vocation. Sensing that the nation was entering an economic depression, she and a friend built a log cabin in Hot Springs, where they operated a multigraph printing press and proved to themselves that they could live courageously despite hunger, cold, and loneliness. After her marriage in 1939 Peggy and her husband, Harry, both subject to wanderlust, found employment and happiness wherever they went. During World War II, for example, they delivered supplies to hospitals, a job which necessitated Peggy's learning to drive a one-ton truck. After the war the Dotterers returned to her beloved Hot Springs, where Peggy taught social studies in the high school until conscience forbade her compliance

with a requirement that she collect money from teachers to support the political party in power. Harry's employment included work on the railroad, in a saw mill, in construction at Western Carolina University, and on a TVA project.

Always alert to ways of enriching the life of the community, Peggy spearheaded the drive in her part of the county to qualify Madison for state aid for a bookmobile program. Although she lacked a degree in library science, her love of books as well as of people, coupled with her spunk and her ability to maneuver a truck, made her a logical choice for the county's first bookmobile operator. By the end of the first year she was making 129 community stops and four school visits each month.

In an article on the formation of the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library, Mrs. Dorothy B. Thomas commented that the bookmobile did more than circulate books; it "accomplished many of the purposes of public relations, community survey, readers' advisory, all rolled into one."<sup>4</sup> Such a task required time, energy, determination, and physical stamina, requirements which Peggy more than fulfilled during the fifteen years her identity was primarily that of Bookmobile Lady.

One of Peggy's preliminary jobs was to introduce books to a basically non-reading population. "I had to create my own demand. I knew I was establishing something that the people were not too excited about," she admits. "One had to be stout-hearted and able to endure many discouragements."<sup>5</sup> Naturally gracious and friendly, Peggy had little difficulty endearing herself even to people usually mistrustful of strangers. As confidante, she listened patiently while isolated women talked out their loneliness. "I made friends out of them because I liked them. I ate with them till I gained weight I didn't need. Sometimes I'd stop to grade a few hands of tobacco. I even helped reestab-

lish one of the old Presbyterian churches."

Recalling how much the county has changed since 1955, Peggy does not deny encountering prejudices. Often a husband would resent his wife's wasting time with books; at these homes Peggy learned not to stop if the man's truck or car was parked in the yard. She calls attention to a picture of her driving garb: dungarees, thick jacket, and high-top men's boots. She dressed thus partly because the elements necessitated warm clothing and partly so that she would be more acceptable to people who might feel self-conscious or resentful of one better dressed. In gradually increasing numbers the people "sampled my wares, liked what they read, and came back for more — though maybe not books the State would approve."<sup>6</sup>

This last statement reveals much about Peggy's perception of a library, not as a repository for books, but as an institution whose sole reason for existence is to get books into the hands of its patrons. Although keenly aware of her role as teacher as well as salesman, she placed prime importance upon her function as servant of the people. Accordingly, her guideline in the selection of books was what the patrons would like to read, not necessarily what professional librarians would advocate that they read. She subscribed wholeheartedly to the definition of a patron which she clipped from the *NORTH CAROLINA STATE LIBRARY NEWS LETTER*: "... A PATRON is a person who brings his wants — it is our job to fill those wants."<sup>7</sup>

In order to appreciate the rapport which Peggy established with her patrons, one has only to read her weekly column entitled "Here Comes the Bookmobile" published in the *Marshall NEWS-RECORD* from January, 1956, through 1968. "The story of the library is all there," she says, patting the brown, already brittle-pageed scrapbook in which she has preserved

these newspaper clippings and other library mementoes.<sup>8</sup> She claims to have adopted a facetious, folksy style in order to arouse interest, but the effect was that of an intimate, almost confidential conversation with the driver of Madison County's Parnassus on Wheels. In the immediate background was each successive bookmobile, named Bookie, Bookie Too, and Blue Cloud respectively, personified as a rather strong-willed, sometimes cantankerous but usually jovial female with an active curiosity and occasional spells of jealousy if she felt slighted or neglected.

The primary purpose of the newspaper columns was, of course, to convey news about the bookmobile. Since the establishment of a route for the bookmobile was a major task, Peggy urged readers to suggest convenient stopping places. Also, she and Bookie went exploring, often into unfamiliar territory. Soon she was driving 1,000 miles a month, although she had to let the actual route remain flexible and evolve by trial and error. Whenever a change in schedule was necessary, Peggy was apologetic and careful to explain the reason. The most frequent — and to Peggy the most exasperating — reason for a change in schedule was inclement weather. For example, she admitted getting "disturbed, agitated, upset, confused, hot and bothered, cold and clammy, so forth and so on" because ice and snow prevented their running on schedule.<sup>9</sup>

The one change in schedule which Peggy welcomed was that occasioned by the numbers of school children who availed themselves of bookmobile services during summer vacation. She rejoiced when "... all our young friends that we got to know so well last summer" were back at places that had been "real lonesome looking in the winter."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the demands made upon her for unscheduled stops were often unreasonable, and Peggy implored people not to take offense if she failed to stop when flagged down at

an individual's home: "It makes me feel sad all day to go whizzing by and leave you standing feeling like you had missed a train."<sup>11</sup>

Library policy has always been for regulations to be kept at a minimum, the criterion being the best possible service to the largest number of patrons. "Rules and regulations are unnecessary if we are thoughtful and considerate of others."<sup>12</sup> Patrons were not conscientious in returning books on time, however, and the problem of overdue books was a persistent concern for Peggy.

Introducing people to the joys of reading and securing for them the kinds of books they liked to read were obviously the most appealing of Peggy's functions as librarian. Repeatedly she urged patrons to request books, which she could secure on loan from the State Library in Raleigh. In addition, the State Library loaned books to be circulated via the bookmobile. Whenever funds were available, Peggy purchased books that had been requested. While recognizing that "no one person would want to read every book even if they were bookworms, . . ." she discussed the various types and purposes of books and reminded people that "Our reading habits and tastes change as we grow and develop."<sup>13</sup>

Although she begrudged the countless hours which she had to devote to book-keeping, Peggy acknowledged that the

keeping of records was an essential part of her job. Frequently she reported on circulation figures, and she was justifiably exultant when there was a marked increase in the number of books being circulated.<sup>14</sup> At the same time she recognized that figures are only one measure of the library's progress:

You would have to go along with Bookie and me, out on the route. There are folks who have never missed us a single time since we started running a year ago last October. There are folks who walk quite a long way to meet us. There are the little pre-school age children, who love their books. No, figures won't tell it and words won't tell it adequately.<sup>15</sup>

All aspects of library procedure Peggy shared freely with her readers, in accordance with her insistence that the library's growth was dependent upon their support and enthusiasm. At least twice she was fearful for the library's very existence, and her columns conveyed an anxiety which no doubt preyed upon her mind many times during the years the library derived more nourishment from her personal zeal than from financial support. Nevertheless, with a modicum of encouragement Peggy held fast to her dreams, usually with diligence and perseverance, but sometimes with elation and sometimes with the protective belligerence of a mother hen. Peggy certainly did not flee from battle when provoked, especially by what she considered injustices in her native county.<sup>16</sup> Intuitively diplomatic, however, she knew

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that people are often more receptive to change when they are not under pressure. "Patience is a virtue!" "Life is what you make it." With such adages as these she liberally spiked her columns, and the philosophy conveyed was obviously a pervasive force in her own life.

Several of her attitudes bear mention because of the insight they give into Peggy's personality and her impact upon others. First of all, Peggy had a definite religious orientation. She did not hesitate to make explicit comments about her faith, and her faith was implicit in her affirmative attitude toward individuals and toward life in general.

Confessing to "a mercurial" disposition, Peggy had a poetic sensitivity to all manifestations of nature. Reporting how she had pulled off the road for a picnic lunch, she identified the signs that "spring had sprung" in February: bees were buzzing, hens scratching, roosters crowing, a brook (actually a muddy creek) babbling; somebody was gee-hawing to a team over the hill.<sup>17</sup>

Another dominant element in Peggy's disposition, one that stood her in good stead when the weather was unpropitious or library progress slow, was her sense of humor. She might need Santa's sleigh to get around in Madison County,<sup>18</sup> but she could talk of snow like white daffodils.<sup>19</sup> Even when it rained "pitch forks, cats and dogs and toad frogs,"<sup>20</sup> she complained only that the moisture went up her sleeves and down the back of her neck instead of into the ground, where it was needed.<sup>21</sup> She appreciated jokes by others and could tell one at the expense of such librarians as the one who reported that her library was getting along fine because "all of my books but two are on the shelves, and I am going out to get those now."<sup>22</sup>

It was probably this sense of humor that enabled Peggy to accept compromise and also to focus upon the positive

aspects of a situation. Though reckoning that by the "standard of society in general" Madison County residents would be classed as "have nots," she maintained that "Somehow we feel that the 'have nots' have something very, very important to good, happy, contented living that the 'haves' do not have."<sup>23</sup> Thoroughly convinced of the value of her native county, Peggy sought to foster in all its residents a sense of pride and self-esteem. She did this in part by seizing upon every opportunity, such as an anniversary or National Book Week, to recall days gone by. She had a storehouse of fond memories, and she was often nostalgic about the past. At the same time, however, she recognized the psychological effect of a backward glance. Even when growth seemed imperceptible, a comparison of what was with what used to be afforded reason for encouragement.

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Certain milestones predominated. At the 1956 State Fair, Madison County Home Demonstration Clubs won a blue ribbon for their booth which featured the library. The walk-in service provided by Bookie Too, purchased in 1957, was a marked improvement over Bookie, and Blue Cloud was even better. Likewise there was steady improvement in physical facilities. Books were housed first in a fire exit in the public school in Marshall, then in the Community Center in Hot Springs, and at last in a building of their own in Marshall. An editorial in *THE NEWS-RECORD* hailed the opening of the library's first reading room, on Main Street in Marshall, as a "progressive step for this area" and an "opportunity for more and better reading" which "should be met with enthusiastic and welcomed responses by the public."<sup>24</sup> That same year, 1960, branch libraries were opened one afternoon a week in Mars Hill and Hot Springs, both with volunteer staff.

In 1969 the Library Board reached a decision concerning a problem which had been perplexing them for several years. Bookmobile service is especially costly in counties such as Madison, where poor roads over precipitous terrain make winter driving hazardous and where houses are so widely dispersed as to make community stops unsuccessful. In Peggy's files are pages of figures with which she calculated for each section of the county the cost of service per person and per book. These amounts vary, from \$1.33 per person and \$.13 a book in one section to \$.61 per person and \$.35 per book in another. This expense, plus the fact that the bookmobile needed replacement for the sake of safety, prompted the Board to petition the State Library Board to waive the requirement of bookmobile service. Upon the recommendation of Miss Elaine von Oesen, Assistant State Librarian, the Board reluctantly granted permission.

This decision was more than an economic one for Peggy: she had made a large emotional investment in the bookmobile. In a manila folder labeled "Letters from Borrowers" she has preserved notes written with varying degrees of legibility on an assortment of papers. The following excerpts bear eloquent witness to the county's regard for the Bookmobile Lady:

My dear Mrs. Dotterer: Thank you very very much for seeking "The Fair Land" for me. It was kind and thoughtful. And far and away "Above and beyond the line of duty. . ."

Dear "Bookie" I read in the News Record that you could make more stops on the Mars Hill Road. My little girl (12 years) will be in a cast all summer and I wondered if you would stop in front of my house so that she can get books. . . .

Dear Mrs. Dougherty, Sorry we missed you the other time. No one was at home. I enjoyed the books you left the last time, just send me about five or six like those. . . .

Mrs. Bookie, We're sorry we couldn't meet you. The books are in the mailbox. . . .

Please renew No Wings in the Manse. Sure is a good book. My family sure do enjoy the books so much. . . . Leave me 3 more. Thank you. . . . I don't want any thing about London and pick out some Bible story Books and a couple for the boys.

. . . My [wife] and I live at the Cold Springs Cabins, 6 mi. west of Marshall. . . . We see the Bookmobile pass often, but it never stops in this area, and we want very much to get books to read. Will you advise immediately how we may take advantage of your service. At the moment we want three books by Corra Harris, viz. "The Circuit Rider's Wife," "The Recording Angel," and "Eve's Second Husband." Please let me hear from you at once.

Peggy refused to let emotion cloud her perception of reality, however. "For a long time I had this compulsive feeling that you went no matter what," she admits. "We made the bookmobile a dramatic thing."<sup>25</sup> "But now society is mobile; people have cars, and they can drive to work, or to the store, or to the library."<sup>26</sup> Without reservation, therefore, Peggy gave allegiance to the library headquarters, and at the end of the first year in the new location she reported progress as "spectacular."<sup>27</sup>

In paying tribute to the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library, Barbara Daven-

port said that "thanks must go to many people . . . to the mountain folk themselves, to librarians like Mrs. Thomas, and to legislators—local, State, and Federal—who have seen the needs of the rural library and over the years have done much to help."<sup>28</sup> To no less degree did Peggy Dotterer acknowledge that the Madison County Library was a corporate venture. Genuinely appreciative of any kindness, whether to her or to the library, she expressed her gratitude publicly and thereby increased the people's self-esteem and fostered in them a sense of responsibility toward their library.

Sustained by the reassurance of friendship on the part of individuals, Peggy relied also upon the Library Board to provide encouragement and to serve as mediator between the library and the county. "There were long dry periods of disinterest on the part of some Board members," she admits, "but there have always been people" who have given unstintingly of their time and talents. "They're the kind you go to when the going gets rough."<sup>29</sup> The going did get rough for Peggy personally, though she considered 1969-70 a "very satisfying year" for the library.<sup>30</sup> Within a short span of time Peggy lost by death three people who were especially dear to her: her husband Harry, Miss Phyllis Snyder, who was Library Consultant at Raleigh and who "had a sense of humor and my kind of personality," and Mrs. Dorothy Thomas, "a close personal friend for many years. Those deaths hit me hard, and besides I was tired and it was time for me to turn over my baby to someone else."<sup>31</sup>

Thus on June 30, 1970, Peggy retired as acting librarian. "I left feeling happy," she says. "We had done wonderfully well—considering."<sup>32</sup> Looking back to the formation of the library she saw

. . . a small storage space in the school on the island, a few not too readable books and a very old flop-sided bookmobile—that

caused the borrowers and me to select and check out books in rain and snow when the elements were not too cooperative.

From the vantage point of the fifteenth year, progress seems steady, sure and very certain. At many times during the fifteen years it seemed slow, uncertain and frustrating. I look with pride and satisfaction at our present library with the possibilities of improved service still to be realized.<sup>33</sup>

Peggy is understandably weary after the years she spent proselytizing a non-reading public, vying with advocates of other worthwhile causes for financial support by county officials, exploring every possible source of funding, and enduring apathy, even antipathy, as well as harsh climate and terrain in order to establish what library patrons now recognize with pride and appreciation. Nevertheless, Peggy continues to manifest independence and maternal concern in her acceptance of change and in her involvement in library affairs, both as bookkeeper and as librarian in the Hot Springs Branch. "For the first time in my lifetime people are moving into Madison," she observes, "and in the foreseeable future we'll get funds. But you can't let your mind run ahead; you can't move ahead of people."<sup>34</sup>

The people of Madison are moving ahead by themselves, however. Though their numbers decreased from 20,522 in 1955 to 16,003 in 1970, they have come to realize the power of concerted effort, and their plans include the growth of the library. In its proposal for the "systematic expansion of the community facilities and services to meet the demand for the next twenty years," the Madison County Planning Board recommended significant increases in library holdings, staff, and facilities.<sup>35</sup> Peggy's successor, Mrs. Lucille Roberts, is a certified librarian and constantly alert to new avenues of service. In the fall of 1975, the library also employed Mrs. Virginia White as Children's Services Librarian and director of the federally funded SKIPA project (Story-

telling for Kiddies in the Preschool Age). Already these two ladies have established programs with twenty children's groups throughout the county and have reached almost half of the county's 723 preschoolers. Volunteers help keep the branch libraries open for additional hours and help to deliver the recently acquired large-print books to senior citizens in the lunch club programs. In response to such expressions of interest on the part of citizens, the Madison County Board of Commissioners is demonstrating increased support of the library. The Mars Hill Bicentennial Organization has given an additional

vote of confidence by adopting as its major project the securing of a new branch library facility. This broadened basis of support from those who care about the intellectual and cultural welfare of their region should enable the library to become the kind of "creative center" which Douglas M. Knight says is to be defined, "not only by the adequacy of its space and collections, but also by the adequacy of its people."<sup>35</sup> Certainly there is no doubt about the adequacy of Madison County's librarians. As Peggy Dotterer maintains: "Fate decrees change, and I'm not afraid of poverty or of adventure."<sup>37</sup>

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>APPALACHIAN NOTES, II (Fourth Quarter, 1974), 60.
- <sup>2</sup>Karl Fleming, "State Is Tops Is Use; Bookmobiles Seeking Lone Corners of North Carolina," ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES, LXXXIX (January 12, 1958), 3.
- <sup>3</sup>Interview with Mrs. Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 6, 1973.
- <sup>4</sup>"The Making of The Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Region Library," NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES, XXIII (Spring, 1965), 84.
- <sup>5</sup>Interview with Mrs. Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 6, 1973.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Margaret C. Van Dussen. Quoted in "Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD, LVI (October 31, 1957).
- <sup>8</sup>Interview with Mrs. Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 6, 1973.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD, LV (June 4, 1956); LVI (May 30, 1957).
- <sup>11</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD, LVII (July 3, 1958).
- <sup>12</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD, LV (January 12, 1956).
- <sup>13</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD LV (November 1, 1956).
- <sup>14</sup>On June 7, 1956, she reported 1,070 registered borrowers and 2464 books owned, plus 757 on loan from the State Library. By August 8, 1957, she could report 1,671 registered borrowers and 3,369 books owned. During the first year 10,685 books were circulated; the figure rose to 21,885 the next year.
- <sup>15</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD, LVI (January 3, 1957).
- <sup>16</sup>Admittedly irate over the condition of a highway, for example, she wondered in her column dated May 5, 1966, whether the state representatives thought "that this state ends at Asheville," and
- she intended to act on the principle that "The wheel that does the squeakin', is the one that gets the grease."
- <sup>17</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile" THE NEWS-RECORD LV (February 16, 1956).
- <sup>18</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile" THE NEWS-RECORD LVII (February 6, 1958).
- <sup>19</sup>"Here Comes the Bookmobile," THE NEWS-RECORD LVII (March 27 1958).
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., LVI (June 20, 1957).
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., LV (February 9, 1956).
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., LVI (October 31, 1957).
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid., LXV (January 20, 1966).
- <sup>24</sup>THE NEWS-RECORD, LIX (October 6, 1960).
- <sup>25</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., October 25, 1973.
- <sup>26</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 27, 1973.
- <sup>27</sup>"Progress Report, 1969-70"; handwritten ms. in Peggy Dotterer's personal scrapbook.
- <sup>28</sup>"Books On the Mountain," AMERICAN EDUCATION (March, 1965), p. 15.
- <sup>29</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., October 25, 1973.
- <sup>30</sup>"Progress Report, 1969-70."
- <sup>31</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 27, 1973.
- <sup>32</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall N. C., October 25, 1973.
- <sup>33</sup>"Progress Report, 1969-70."
- <sup>34</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Marshall, N. C., September 27, 1973.
- <sup>35</sup>Madison County Planning Board, Community Facilities Plan (Madison County, N. C., April 1973), p. 69.
- <sup>36</sup>Douglas M. Knight and E. Shepley Nourse, eds., Libraries At Large: Tradition, Innovation, and the National Interest; The Resource Book Based on the Materials of the National Advisory Commission on Libraries (New York: R. R. Bowker Co., 1969), p. 496.
- <sup>37</sup>Interview with Peggy Dotterer, Mars Hill, N. C. October 31, 1974.



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