Books by the Side of the Road

By JULIA SCOTFIELD HARRON, *Library Editor*

TWO boys, intent upon extracting the last bit of sweetness from their all-day suckers, were making the rounds of the amusements offered by one of the Cleveland city parks. When they sighted the Book Caravan, parked in a conspicuous place, the older boy exclaimed with evident delight, "Gee, they've got a library here already! How's that for service?"

Hundreds of children and many grown-ups welcomed this library-on-wheels with which the Cleveland Public Library reached the play grounds, parks, school grounds, orphanages and remote sections of the city during the summer months.

The Caravan, as you can see from the accompanying illustration, is a miniature library built into an auto truck. The sides lift up and form a roof under which the children who swarm about the shelves of books are sheltered from possible rain, though the activities of the elements seem of little concern to them, so engrossed are they in finding a satisfying book. The shelves displayed by the lifting of the sides hold six hundred books. The librarian rides on the front seat with the driver, the equipment and any guests or extra helpers being stowed away in the narrow space in the center of the car.

The Book Caravan of the Cleveland Public Library

The equipment is simple, a large blue and yellow beach umbrella, one small folding table painted a bright green, four collapsible chairs, also painted green, and three army blankets for the children to sit on while listening to stories.

The gay beach umbrella is a rallying point. Children who remember the visits of the Caravan last summer flock to it, followed by newcomers to the neighborhood, the latter in many cases making their first visit at the urging of some enthusiastic friend, then, in turn, becoming press agents to others. The Caravan visits each stop once a week, its schedule being advertised before the season opens. The children are always waiting, ready to spread the good news as soon as the Caravan is in sight. In one park its approach is heralded by some boys, who, as library hour approaches, climb a tree in order to keep a better look-out.

The aim of the Library in sending out the Caravan is to make reading attractive to the children, many of whom are willing to read to fulfill school requirements but feel that reading, like other school work, should be carefully avoided during vacation. That reading is a pleasure which adds to the joy of vacation, is something which must be brought home to many children. With this in mind, the books selected for the Caravan are fiction, including stories of adventure on sea and land, school stories, dog stories, and many others; popular books of science; travel at home and in the strange places of the earth; and fairy tales, dear to the hearts of all children. These constitute a light but wholesome summer diet.

Grown-ups are provided for, too. Should interested visitors to the Caravan want books to take home with them, or parents send for reading, the shelves on one side of the Caravan are stocked with adult books. That this service is filling a real need is shown by the lending of books in German, Slovenian, Finnish and Czecho-Slovakian, as well as in English.

Although the Caravan plans to make its weekly visits on schedule, its activities at each stop are varied to fit the occasion. At one time the gay umbrella the chairs, and the blankets are arranged in a shady spot, the children make themselves comfortable and the librarian tells stories. Story hour is usually so enthralling that nothing distracts the children, but it is reported that on one sad occasion some small boys, just previous to the happy hour, had rested from their labors on a series of ant hills and as a result were unable to refrain from vigorous clawings at various portions of their anatomy. However, they were so anxious to hear the stories that they managed to quiet down and to wriggle without attracting much attention from anyone but the sympathetic "library teacher."

Another day, though the preparations are the same, the children spend the hour in reading to themselves. Big Sister, clutching a long desired story in one hand, grabs Little Brother with the other and pilots him, protesting loudly, to a choice spot in the shade, where he is seated and told to "Look at your book and be still." Sister plunges into her story and is soon oblivious of such troubles as younger brothers. Little Brother, who yearned for some active occupation involving strenuous use of his shrill young voice, whimpers ineffectually, looks helplessly around at other preoccupied children, and then decides to make the best of a poor state of affairs and see what it is that Big Sister has thrust upon him. The picture book, full of large bright pictures, proves too much for his curiosity, quiet reigns for the rest of the hour, and Little Brother decides to visit the Caravan next week and get more pictures.

Because the children have a keen interest in the Book Caravan and because many of them are showing an increased appreciation of reading as a source of recreation, the Library feels that the work of the Caravan is social service in the truest sense.