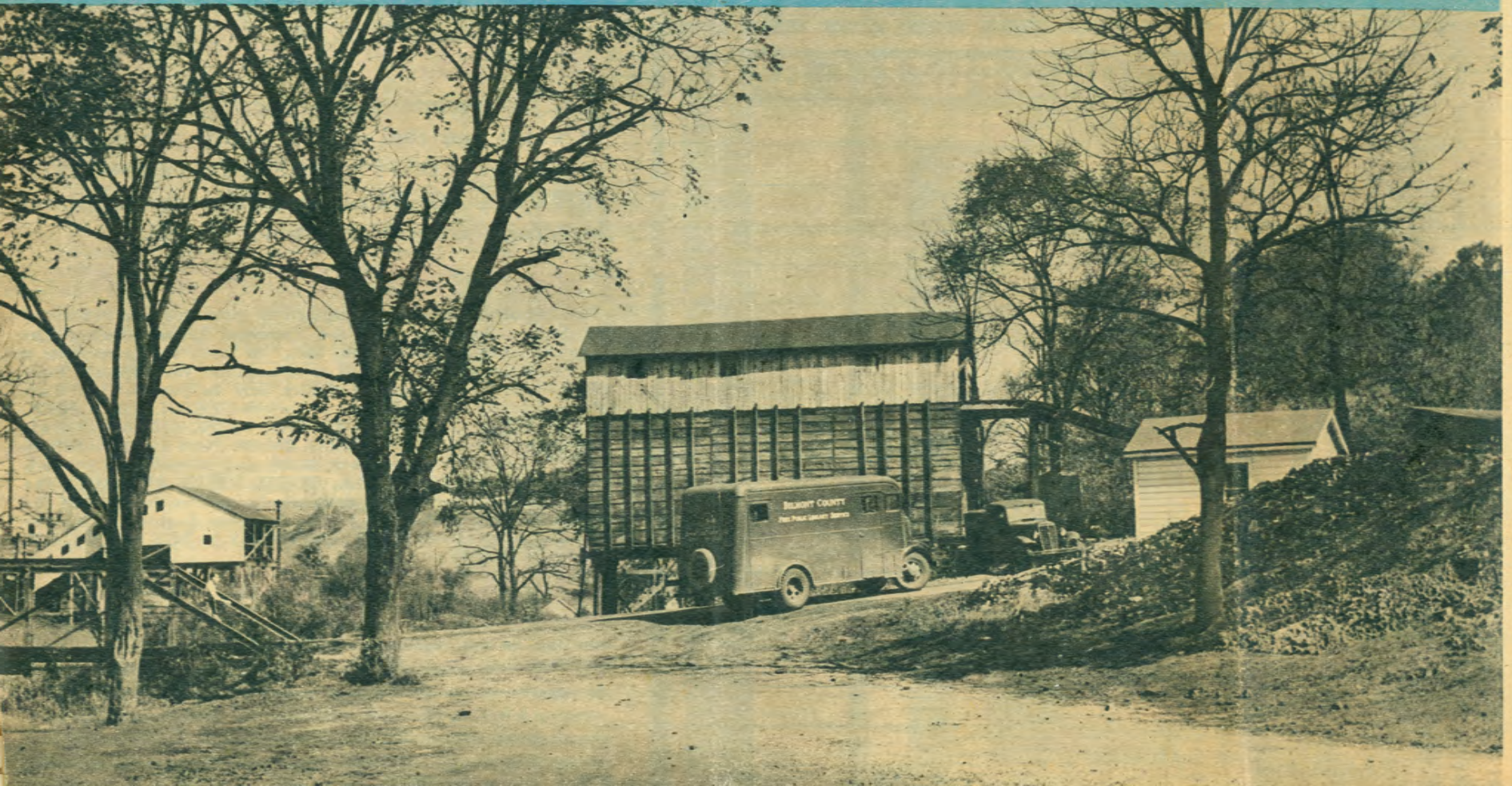
BOOKS on WHEELS



by Jean Harshman

PHOTOS by HAROLD HIGGINS

"IT'S COMING, MA." The small boy, dressed in once-blue overalls, craned his neck to peer through the window and down the winding road.

"It's a little late this trip," said his mother, as she pulled a coat around her shoulders and picked up a pile of books from the table in the hallway of the small house.

She opened the door, just a crack so that the damp, chill breeze wouldn't get in, and she saw the dusty green truck pull to a stop in front of the grocery at the crossroads.

As she hurried toward it, she read the bold letters on its side, "Belmont County Free Public Library Service," and she saw the occupants of the truck open the doors and lower the folding steps.

"Come right in, Mrs. Johnson," invited the librarian from the doorway of the bookmobile, a library on wheels which takes books to the people since the people can't get to the books.

Mrs. Johnson climbed up into the interior of the 9½-ton truck. She placed the books she was returning—a popular work of fiction, a western (which she got for her miner-husband) and a reference book on canning—on the folding desk behind the driver's seat. She walked straight to the shelves marked "adult" but after studying the titles, she said to the librarian, "You pick one out for me, Mrs. Bosley; you know what I like."

Dorothy Bosley, a slim dark-haired bookmobile veteran—she's been working on it since the service began in 1939—quickly selected a trio of books for the housewife and efficiently stamped and marked the cards.

"See you next trip," called out the bookmobile's three workers as Mrs. Johnson left them and trudged homeward, walking slowly so that she could look through the new books that would be her recreation for the next three weeks before the library truck returned to her community.

And away rolled the bookmobile, patiently crawling over the mine-studded hills on its way to the next crossroads stop where another busy housewife or a farmer or schoolboy would be waiting for it.

That's what the bookmobile does eight or more hours a day, five days a week. Operating out of Martins Ferry, where the public library administers its work, the Belmont County Library Bookmobile Service covers a 30-miles-square area.

St. Clairsville, Barnesville, Bellaire and Martins Ferry, the four sizeable communities in the county, have their own libraries. Smaller communities and rural districts, totaling 45,000 people, are served by the book truck.

Periodically the bookmobile visits the five branch or community libraries at Bridgeport, Shadyside, Bethesda, Neffs and Flushing. There boxes of books are left and others are taken away, for the library's collection of 40,000 volumes is rotated.

In addition to the branches, the bookmobile goes to 80 schools and 100 communities. It takes three weeks to cover the large territory. The longest day's trip is 99 miles.

Miss Janet Gregg, county librarian, divides her time among the branches, the bookmobile and the headquarters in the Martins Ferry library.

She plans special projects, such as story hours and book fairs, to tour with the bookmobile. One of her frequent helpers is a 12-year-old puppeteer, David Figg, whom she "borrows" from neighboring Jefferson County, where he lives in the town of Brilliant.

David, who has been working with hand puppets since he was 4, often goes along on a day's trip and gives shows for children, some of whom never have attended a theater. He sets up his tiny stage anywhere there is a foot or two of space.

At other times when the truck stops at a school, Miss Gregg gathers the elementary pupils around her for a brief story "hour."

At 8:30 in the morning, before the Martins Ferry library opens, Mrs. Bosley and her assistant, Freda Kaiser, select the books which will replenish the supply on the truck. They are carried to the mobile library by the driver, Blaine Hinerman, who knows perfectly the back roads of Belmont County and the idiosyncrasies of the truck. The books are placed properly in the tilted shelves, constructed so the books will not fall out.

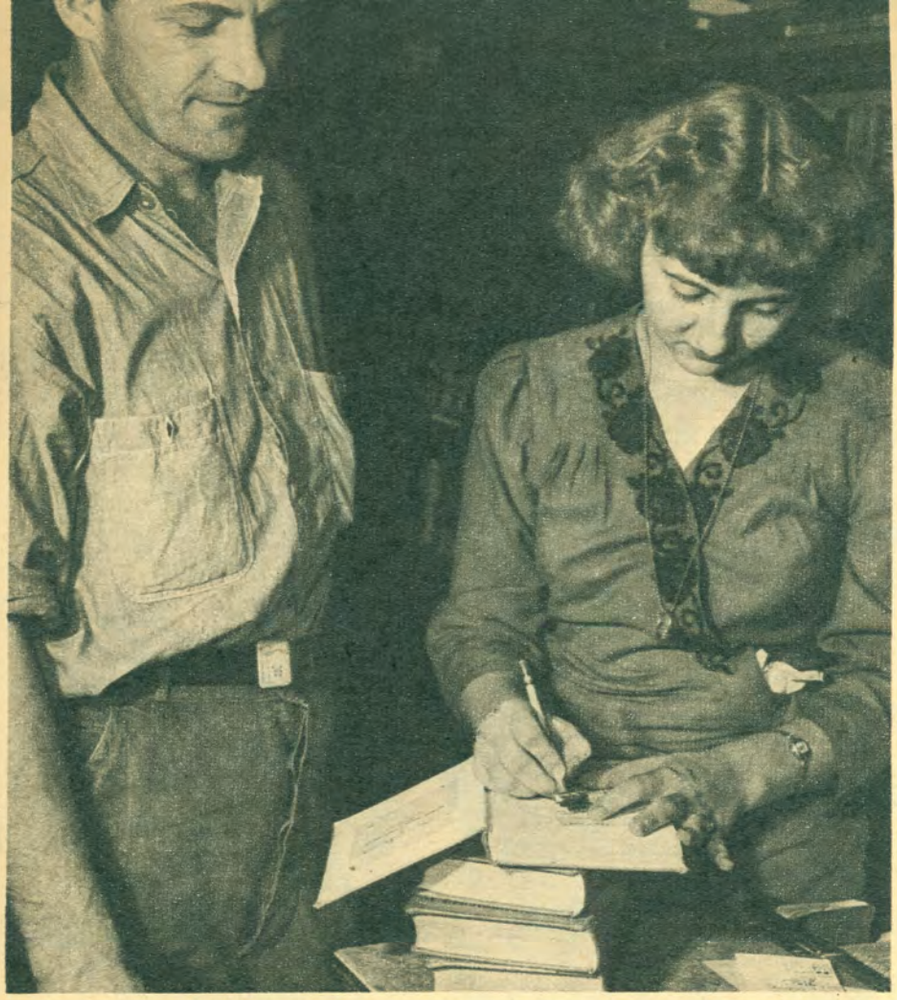
In a few minutes they leave on the day's round. Dorothy and Freda sit by the table which folds out from the wall and they sort cards and arrange their files for the day while the bookmobile is moving to its first destination, perhaps a one-room schoolhouse like the one at Indian Rock.

When the truck arrives at the school, it is parked so that the children won't have to cross the street to get to it. They crowd into the bookmobile 10 at a time.

Quite often the youngsters ask for books for their parents. Teachers, too, take advantage of the service.

The next stop might be a small grocery like the one Fred Diab runs

Books—not soap or nylons—caused this line at Crabapple School.



At a crossroads, Freda Kaiser, assistant librarian, checks out books to William Ripik, a miner whose preference is mysteries and westerns.

on the road to Crabapple. Mr. Diab himself is one of the bookmobile's best "customers." He gives sales talks on the merits of the library to the miners from the Camel Run mine.

Or the truck might go to a tiny town like Midway, where the housewives meet it in front of a closed general store or to Blainesville where the stop is at Colleen's Cafe. It goes to an Ohio River community, often flooded, where a retired river-boat captain borrows books, and it stops at a tavern where the bartender gets a stack of books which he distributes to the miners who cannot visit the bookmobile themselves.

The librarians never tire of telling of the readers who come to them for books.

There is an ex-serviceman on their route who helped with research work while in the Army. He requested every book about Einstein that Belmont County owned. Every book. After he had read all that they could get him about the famous physicist, he was through with the bookmobile. They could interest him in nothing else.

And they tell of the farmer who came to them in early spring with the request for a book about the growing of vegetables. When he returned it, they asked him if he wanted another. "I reckon not now," he drawled. "I'll wait 'til harvest time and see if that one was any good, 'fore I get another."

A miner, a visitor to the book wagon on every trip, always gets technical books or deep political science works. Asked one time if he didn't want something lighter, "to read just for fun," he answered, "I read a couple of love stories once and the people all said the same things and did the same things. I like these books where you don't know what will happen next."

One mother, who had given birth to twin daughters, came with the plea that she had to have "a book that tells what to do with twins." She admitted that she hadn't had any trouble rearing the other children

At Fairport, 12-year-old puppeteer David Figg is ready for the entrance of Little Red Riding Hood, star of the show. Books support the stage.

Librarian Janet Gregg has a "story hour" for Blainesville youngsters.

The truck is parked beside an abandoned store at Midway.

The staff eats lunch "aboard," using the desk for a table.

in her family—but twins! So the librarians got her a special book with schedules and hints for mothers with double trouble.

The Belmont County Library, like the others in the state, is financed by the county tax on intangibles. It also gets state financial aid which helps in the maintenance of its book wagon, purchased four years ago to replace the first one.

There's a dispute concerning which of Ohio's 27 bookmobiles was the first. Some started their service by carrying books through the county in the trunk of a librarian's car or in a trailer. Now, however, some are quite luxurious. Clark County's, operating out of Springfield, cost $4000 for example.

The 27 bookmobiles in the state operate from Alliance, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dayton, Hamilton, Hiram, Lebanon, Lima, Lisbon, Lorain, McConnelsville, Mansfield, Martins Ferry, Maumee, Middletown, Newark, Portsmouth, Springfield, Troy, Warren, Wilmington and Wooster.

"Give Ohioans a chance to read," is their motto.

Crowds always gather to watch the puppet shows presented by David. Some of the wide-eyed young spectators have never been in a theater.