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This week the Library celebrated the launching of our new bookmobile with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the [Branch County Fairgrounds](#). The weather was perfect for the county fair and our celebration of the history of mobile library services in Branch County.

The United States has a [long and proud tradition of public libraries](#), including mobile libraries that started gaining popularity in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Those early

mobile libraries [usually traveled on a mule or a horse-drawn wagon](#). Library services in Branch County stayed put at first: in homes starting in Coldwater in the 1870s, Bronson in the 1880s, Quincy in the 1890s, with each of those libraries erecting within a couple of decades the grand buildings we know today.

The Branch County Library was formed in 1937, and shortly after in 1938 the library acquired its first vehicle. Operated by Ruth Tapper, this bookmobile was basically a truck that was mostly used for hauling books around to what were called “library stations” at the time. These were typically school partners or places like township halls where small collections of about 50 to a couple hundred items were placed. These library stations were refreshed with new books only about once each year, and materials were checked out on an honor system with no due dates. The exact timing is unclear, but at some point the library either replaced the original vehicle or added an additional one. Either way, we have photos from the 1940s of a 1941 Chevrolet panel delivery truck in use by the Library.



Early to mid 1940s



Early to mid 1940s



Branch County's Bookmobile, a 1941 Chevrolet panel truck, next to the Van Buren County Public Library's Bookmobile, a 1946 Dodge panel truck. Photo c. 1946.

The first bookmobile in the county that people could actually walk into was launched in October 1947. Holding 1,500 items, it was almost as big as our new vehicle. Bringing books, magazines, and vinyl records to schools, stores, and community halls, it was the biggest bookmobile in Michigan outside of Wayne County at the time.



BOOKS FOR RURAL AREAS—Along with its stops each month at the front doors of 69 rural schools, the Branch county library's new bookmobile serves eight smaller libraries in the county as well as making stops at stores and main crossroads in the farm districts. At left the traveling library, holding 1,500 volumes, pulls up at a Bronson store. At right, the interior of the vehicle permits patrons to walk in and look over the books on shelves. Near the driver's seat at the front of the truck is a stand where books are checked out.

Branch Library on Wheels Now Covers Entire County

COLDWATER—Since its new program was inaugurated six months ago, the Branch county library last October not only procured the first large bookmobile in the state outside of Wayne county but also has extended its service to rural areas so that it covers the entire county and a few places outside. Several other counties have since acquired bookmobiles.

With a five year grant of funds made by the Kellogg Foundation last June, the library secured Robert Orr as head librarian and began its expansion plan.

Staff Increased to 12

From a staff of two, its employees have increased to 12. A unit that formerly visited the 69 rural schools in the county perhaps twice a year, now comes directly to the school door each month with the new bookmobile and hundreds of books. The larger Quincy, Union City and Bronson schools are included.

School children in the county rural districts take out 3,000 books a month. Adult patronage brings the total monthly circulation to more than 4,500.

Making a chain of libraries throughout the county for adults, the Branch headquarters signed contracts with the two other libraries in the county, at Union City and Quincy, giving them the use of their books and providing part-time librarians.

Branch Units Formed

Added to these are six smaller township units at Algonsee, Batavia, Butler, California, Gilead and Kinderhook. These are visited by a panel truck from Coldwater headquarters each week with new books and the stock in each is completely changed every three months. Later this year more branches will be established.

Adults are served, too, by the library on wheels and Mr. Orr makes 18 stops at stores and community halls in the territory, as well as visiting shut-ins in rural areas to exchange their books. The bookmobile has been in service for three months.

Since Mr. Orr came to the library, Mrs. Alice Weller, formerly the only librarian, has been made children's librarian and the organization emphasizes service to the rural schools.

About half of the 40,000 books available are for younger readers. During 1947 the library added \$7,000 worth of volumes to its collection.

Headquarters Renovated

Along with the enlarged staff came renovation of the library's headquarters in the basement of the county building in Coldwater. Unused rooms were redecorated and more space for the enlarged book inventory made.

Complete statistics have been kept for the past six months, for the first time since the library's formation in 1938.

"Now that the basic physical set-up of the library is in good working order," said Mr. Orr, "we are concentrating on service." A new feature, still an experiment, is making the latest popular magazines available on the bookmobile and at the permanent branches.

To Increase Service

Recent figures show that 20 percent of the 15,000 rural persons make use of the book service. In 1948 Mr. Orr hopes to increase this figure.

The county library, he feels, is just starting its development in the state and some day he hopes to see a regional traveling library formed among several counties in this area.

Mr. Orr has done library work since his high school days and formerly worked in Illinois library systems, on the staff of the Detroit public library and spent four and one-half years in the army doing similar work. Both he and Mrs. Weller are graduates of the University of Illinois library school.

Article from the Coldwater Daily Reporter, Feb. 1, 1948



1948



c. 1948



*Children's Librarian Hazel Whipple and children at a stop in
Algansee, Oct. 14, 1948*



The Detroit News, March 17, 1948



The Detroit News, March 17, 1948

Just a few years later in 1953, [the Branch County Library sold that bookmobile](#) for a smaller vehicle that was easier to drive and maintain. Angeline Dean and Lois Shaw were among the librarians who made dozens of stops each month, including at 11 schools. One of those two ladies would drive and the other be on the lookout for potholes or, according to the newspaper, would navigate to the harder-to-find areas of the county...like [Butler](#) and [Stringtown](#).



—Photo by L. B. Keller.
BOOK-LEARNING—Miss Angeline Dean, assistant Branch county librarian, hands a box of books up to her summer helped, Miss Lois Shaw, as they prepare to make one of their visits to the various station libraries. The books in the station libraries are being changed this summer for the first time in about 12 months.

Compass Is Sometimes Needed By Branch Library Workers

COLDWATER—Exploration isn't usually part of a library's operating procedure, but for the Branch county library it's a necessity.

Miss Angeline Dean, cataloger, and her assistant, Miss Lois Shaw, found that out this summer when they began to change books in the various library stations and units around the county.

Their schedule so far has called for them to visit comparatively well-known places in the county such as Girard and Kinderhook as well as the harder-to-find spots like String Town and Butler.

Project Hard Work

Although the job of carrying something like 1,650 books in and out of the rural libraries so far has been hard work, it is sometimes even harder to find where these libraries are. In String Town, which is not even shown on most county maps, the procedure is to find a person who lives in that part of the county and have him point it out.

The changing of books, which are mostly children's stories and light fiction and non-fiction for the grown-ups, occurs about once a year.

This year Miss Shaw drives the library's panel truck while Miss Dean acts as "navigator." She also looks out for the worst of the bumps on the county's back roads, which sometimes make the truck sound as if it has been shaken apart.

Aside from providing the county's two libraries workers a practical course in path-finding the library project makes available a very real service to the county's rural people.

The station libraries and the library units are usually set up in a general store or some other central meeting place in the townships. A book borrower has only to sign his name on the library card and leave it in a box provided to take out a book. There is no time limit on how long it may be kept.

So far this month, 1,000 books have been taken to Girard, 175 books have gone to the Benke store, the Crystal Beach store and String Town and 125 books have gone to the Curtis store at Marble Lake.

The book-changing will go on until all 13 of the units and stations have been visited. After that, the librarians figure it should be getting time for school opening when the bookmobile goes to work.

The bookmobile visits 100 rooms in 74 schools during the school year to let pupils pick reading material from its shelves. It differs from the summer visits in that the books remain on the shelves in the bookmobile and aren't changed back and forth from the small outlying libraries.

The exact dates are unclear, but sometime between 1953 and 1966 the Branch County Library had acquired a large bookmobile again. Unfortunately, after [a failed millage campaign](#) in 1966 [to unify the Coldwater and County libraries](#), the Library ended bookmobile services as part of its cost reduction efforts. But county residents who grew up during those last years of the county bookmobile certainly remember it fondly to this day.

Bookmobile Service Is Important To Program

Bookmobile service is an important phase of any library program and so it has been in Branch County as school and community stops are made regularly.

In areas of the county where there is no unit library nearby, the bookmobile makes community stops every other week. At these places, the bookmobile is parked for a designated time for the area residents to come and select various types of library materials to use until the mobile unit arrives again.

If a book title, is not on the bookmobile shelf, or a magazine, record or film-strip is desired by a borrower, the request can be made by the patron for the driver to bring at the next scheduled visit.

Community stops for Branch County Library's bookmobile are at East Gilead, Batavia, California township and Butler.

Eleven schools are each visited once a month by the bookmobile, giving the students and teachers a chance to select materials to supplement the school libraries.

Bookmobile stops are made at the high school, junior high school and two elementary schools in Bronson; the high school, junior high school and elementary school in Union City; the high school and elementary school in Quincy; and at the Girard and Sherwood schools.

In spite of the fact that the 16-year-old bookmobile is only 16 feet long, there is provided for the book borrowers of all ages a variety of books from which to select. Periodic changes are made in the collection so new selections are available for each bookmobile visit.

Even though Branch county residents have had the Coldwater Public Library, Branch County Library headquarters at the courthouse in Coldwater, and the

Bronson, Union City, Quincy, Sherwood, Girard, Lakeland, Algansee and Kinderhook libraries from which to borrow books, the need for bookmobile service in the county has been proven by the circulation reports for the bookmobile division of the library.

According to William K. Smith, library director, circulation reports given by bookmobile drivers, Mrs. Cora Talant and Mrs. Dorothy Catey, show the wide use of bookmobile facilities



ONE LIBRARIAN ASSISTS CUSTOMER

The Daily Reporter, 1966



1966



1966



1966

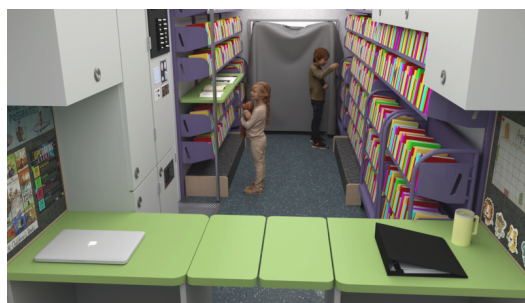
In 2018, not long after [a successful millage campaign](#), the Branch District Library (BDL) embarked on a strategic planning process to ensure that the Library was meeting the needs of everyone in its service area. During the community conversations around the county, a number of people talked of their fond memories of the last bookmobile when they were younger and how they felt a new bookmobile could make a positive impact on the county in modern times.

One of the overarching goals in [the final 2018 BDL Strategic Plan](#) was to offer our library users wide-ranging and convenient access to library services, while breaking down barriers to access whenever possible. Another goal was to increase the visibility of the Library in the community and go beyond the walls of our branches. The BDL Board decided that a bookmobile would be a part of addressing both goals, along with [Library by Mail](#) services, more [digital services](#), and [many other improvements we have made as part of that Strategic Plan](#).

BDL originally planned on fundraising for the purchase of a bookmobile; instead, budget surpluses during the Covid-19 pandemic made it possible for the Library to purchase the vehicle with no additional fundraising needed. In the Fall of 2021 [the BDL Board approved the project](#), and the following January Cheryl Lawrence was promoted to her new role at the Library: Outreach Manager. Cheryl spent the next several months learning all she could about bookmobiles and their operation. In Spring of 2022 we took bids, [selected a winner](#), and in May placed the order for the new vehicle.

In retrospect, it's astounding that we managed to order the vehicle in such a short time, because it's very much like building a house. There are so many details to select and you really have to know about the implications of every choice before you decide. Cheryl efficiently led the library through this process, and through the subsequent years of tweaks that followed. For example, we planned on a 20-foot Ford drivetrain and ended up with a 27-foot Freightliner, things were moved around on the inside, and so on. We hoped the results would be worth the wait.

Interior View 1



Interior Renderings, 2022

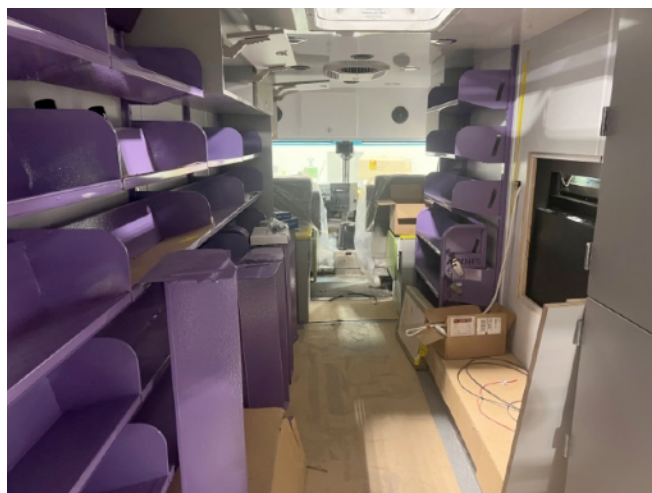
But what a wait it was! We ordered our bookmobile in 2022 with our pandemic fund surplus. Many other libraries around the country were ordering bookmobiles around this same time for similar reasons. The Red Cross and other organizations did the same thing for bloodmobiles, mobile classrooms, and mobile science labs, so there was an near instant backlog in production of custom vehicles nationwide. Initially we were told we'd have a delay of maybe a year, but it was almost 3 years from order to delivery.

Our vehicle finally began its life in 2023, just a short drive west at the [Morgan Olson](#) factory in Sturgis. In a beautifully poetic coincidence, Cheryl's husband, Jon Lawrence, worked at Morgan Olson and was almost certainly involved in the creation of the vehicle that became the BDL bookmobile. From Sturgis, the vehicle was transported to Greensboro, North Carolina, to the [Matthews Specialty Vehicles](#) factory, where it got a brand-new Freightliner diesel drivetrain installed. And then ... we waited ... and waited. The staff at Matthews Specialty Vehicles were absolutely fantastic to work with, though, and we highly recommend them! While we waited we loved getting status updates and photos from them, which we "oohed" and "ahhed" over like excited new parents.



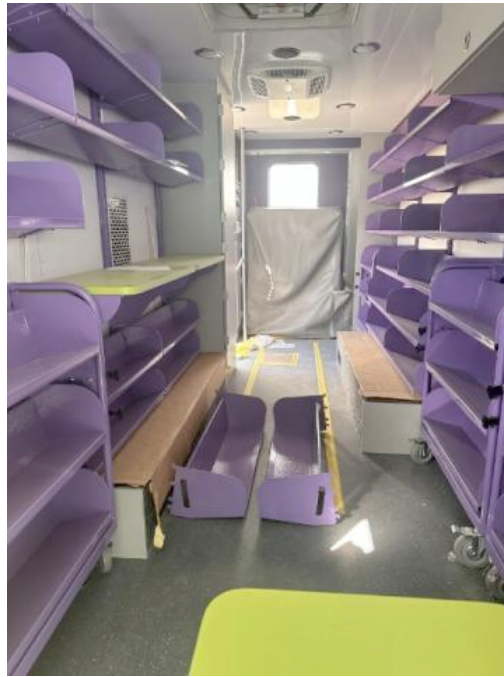
Body Complete, December 2023

To be precise, most of the library was waiting for something to happen with the bookmobile. Cheryl, on the other hand, stayed very busy building up the [Library by Mail](#) program and laying the groundwork for our future bookmobile routes. Working with organizations like [Maple Lawn](#) and township halls in areas far from our BDL branches, she effected agreements to establish pop-up library sites, similar to those first library stations almost a century ago. For more than two years Cheryl would bring small collections of materials to these stops and get people used to the idea that a bookmobile would arrive some day.



At the Matthews Specialty Vehicles Factory, August 2024

During this waiting period, we began to tackle the issue of what it would take to outfit the vehicle with materials and technology once it arrived. We had been able to order the vehicle without fundraising, but on our normal operating budget we were projecting several more years to completely stock and prepare the vehicle. With that in mind, BDL approached local organizations to apply for grants and solicited small donations from the public at large. And the community really came through to make this day possible!



*At the Matthews Specialty Vehicles Factory,
October 2024*



At the Matthews Specialty Vehicles Factory, October 2024

Our bookmobile project would not have been possible without the generous support of

- [The Branch County Community Foundation](#)
- [The Coldwater Twp. Sunrise Rotary](#)
- [Apex Clean Energy / Coldwater Solar](#)
- Friends of the Lucille E. Dearth Union Twp. Branch Library
- Numerous individual small donors

Thank you so very much to all of those organizations and individuals who shared our vision of increasing access to library services through this vehicle!

Thankyou



The Friends of the Lucille E. Dearth
Union Twp. Branch Library

and numerous individual small donations!

CONNECT WITH US
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WE'RE MORE THAN JUST BOOKS



Just like in the 1930s through the 1960s, there are people in this community who are unable to get to our brick-and-mortar locations but still deserve full access to library services. [They are guaranteed it, in fact, under the Michigan Constitution.](#) This mobile library is part of our efforts to lower barriers to access those services and reach as many people as possible. To bring BDL to them. To increase awareness of the Library and what we do.



Bookmobiles on Display in Lansing, April 2025



Brandon Apmann and Cheryl Lawrence, Lansing, April 2025

Nearly everything you can do at one of our branches you can do on the bookmobile. This 27-foot vehicle has over 2,000 items in the collection for a variety of ages. And as hopefully everyone knows by now: all of those BDL materials have [no late fees!](#)

We offer free notary service right on the vehicle. Free faxing. Free WiFi through our cellular connection. You can [print from your mobile device](#) or [use a laptop](#) for a quick computer session. Library staff will help visitors to find reliable answers to their questions without any [AI hallucinations](#). If library users are looking for something we don't have on the vehicle, we can order it for them from another BDL branch, or [from a library across the state](#), and then deliver it on a future stop.



August 2025



May 2025

Because we have not had a mobile library service for nearly 60 years, we are starting small and ramping up slowly. [We have about 7-10 stops so far in a given month](#), but expect that number to increase over time. The bookmobile will also participate in parades and other special events. [You can request to have the bookmobile make an appearance at your event or get a stop added to our route.](#)

Thank you once again to this community and to our special donors for their tremendous support of the library and this project!

John Rucker, Director
August 7, 2025

*Thanks to Heritage Room Coordinator
Brittany Gemmill for research assistance.*



July 2025