

The Pack Horse Library Project of Eastern Kentucky blunted the ravages of Great Depression poverty and spread a love of reading to rural areas.

Hunting for the latest bestseller, researching a topic for a college essay or buying a novel for an upcoming vacation has never been easier. Today public libraries, bookstores, websites, apps and Kindles satisfy our literary itch.

Books, however, were not always readily available—and neither were jobs.

During the Great Depression, families lost farms and houses owned for generations, dating back to the Revolutionary War. Men abandoned wives and children; babies died from malnutrition. In good times, the state of Kentucky ranked as one of the poorest in the nation, but by the mid-1930s the unemployment rate in Appalachia soared to 40 percent of working-age adults, high above the national average of 25 percent.

Closure of half the region's mines by 1933 and flooding of the Ohio River drove the final nails into any hope of recovery. Unpaved gravel roads, only accessible on foot or by horseback, severed thousands of Kentucky residents from the outside world, even from their closest neighbors in some circumstances.

Unemployment shielded an insidious problem too: illiteracy. Some estimates state as many as 30 percent of the area's residents were illiterate. Coupled with

The WPA Pack Horse Library Project delivered books and magazines, serving nearly 100,000 people in Eastern Kentucky between 1935 and 1943.





SADDLING UP FOR MORE THAN A PAYCHECK

By Anna I. Sochocky

All Photos Courtesy The University Of Kentucky Archives

isolated geography and a culture wary of the outside world, illiteracy threatened any economic advancement Eastern Kentucky residents might benefit from in the future.

While President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, launched in 1935, enjoyed early successes by putting millions of unemployed men back to work on schools, power plants and road construction projects, economic salvation for some women arrived on the back of a horse.

Established in 1935, the Pack Horse Library Project, a component of the WPA, sought to broaden literacy in homes and schools while also putting people back to work. One of the New Deal's most creative initiatives, the Pack Horse Librarian Project enlisted unemployed Appalachian women to distribute books and magazines to nearly every resident living in a 10,000-square mile region of rural Eastern Kentucky.

No GPS Available

Imagine saddling up your mount at 4:30 a.m. before setting off to traverse rugged, remote and muddy territory mired with sheer ravines and harrowing cliff lines. Low-lying creek beds were often the only "highway system" snaking through the landscape. Boots froze in stirrup irons. Horses slithered down muddy mountain slopes. On the occasions when these waters flooded, librarians coaxed horses across raging rivers deep enough to reach an animal's belly. One librarian hiked her 18-mile route after her mule died.



Delivering the gift of literacy, a pack horse librarian navigated the hills and hollows of her delivery route.

Pack horse librarians were required to deliver their literary loads year-round in any weather. If the destination was too remote to reach on horseback or the equine died, riders walked. Directions to family houses scribbled on bits of paper or verbal instructions replete with references to topographical signposts served as the only maps to find assigned delivery locations. Geographical areas were nicknamed, including Hell for Sartini, Troublesome and Cut Shin, suggesting the perilous nature of the landscape.

Each pack horse librarian, or "book woman" as locals called these equestrians, received a monthly stipend of \$28, paid by the WPA, and she was required to own or lease a horse or mule and provide for its care as well. Riders packed saddlebags, pillowcases and potato sacks with upwards of 100 books and magazines to deliver at least twice a month, sometimes logging upwards of 100 to 120 miles each week. The

average pack horse librarian was between 25 and 35, married, and the family's sole wage earner.

WPA policies required that each pack horse librarian be local to the community. The riders worked from a base library, and those libraries were housed in schools, post offices and churches. Because the WPA only paid librarian salaries and did not buy books, professional librarians managed book donation drives and solicited parent-teacher associations, scouting troops, Sunday school classes and women's civic organizations to collect or donate reading material or funds for the collection.

Creative campaigns sprouted around the country. As word of need spread throughout the country, book donations from nearly half the states arrived. One particularly successful campaign called The Penny Fund Plan encouraged all PTA members to give a penny towards the purchase of dwindling book supplies. When demand eclipsed inventory, librarians made scrapbooks from damaged materials, collecting recipes, newspaper clippings, sewing patterns, and canning and gardening tips to distribute.

Success Breeds Literacy

The motivation for these 1930s equestriennes surpassed more than a modest paycheck, however. Pack horse librarians picked their way across challenging terrain to spread the gift of literacy—delivering books and magazines to families living in shacks or abandoned miner camps or to schoolhouses the size of closets.

Sixty-three percent of Kentucky's



Muddy terrain presented obstacles for pack horse librarians, but teams charted courses of their own.



Summer days offered a warm respite for a team of pack horse librarians. The riders worked year-round and were often forced to wade through icy waters in other seasons.

Children clamored around a pack horse librarian, eager for her to unload her literary cargo.



residents did not have access to a public library at the beginning of the Great Depression. Mountain schools rarely had libraries, meaning that many students living in rural areas had never checked out a book. A visit from a pack horse librarian unlocked the futures of families.

In the early days librarians on horseback encountered deep-rooted suspicions of outsiders, views long held by mountain families. The librarians recognized the depth of religious belief in the community and offered to read Bible passages aloud to gain the trust of potential patrons.

A visit from a book woman also offered comfort to the infirm, whether from injury or age. Many read to their patrons or taught family members to read. Riders also brought news from other family members, and in some cases fetched a doctor for an ailing person. Pack horse librarians became part of

the family for many, and the popularity of the WPA project soared.

Upon the arrival of one of the traveling librarians to a school, hordes of children would swarm the woman in the saddle. Picture books ignited interest in reading, and once students knew how to read, children read to their parents and grandparents. Books by Mark Twain and “Robinson Crusoe” were in high demand, but as children grew, so did their interests in the outside world. Travel and adventure titles flew out of saddlebags into inquisitive hands.

Parents squeezed for time preferred magazines. Women’s Home Companion and Popular Mechanics, the most sought-after magazines, kept readers in touch with new fashions or taught them to repair farm implements or sewing machines, even if the magazines were six months old. National

Geographic and Western Story Magazine fed a growing curiosity in the world beyond the mountains of Kentucky. Female readers were more prone to seek out beloved novels like “Rebecca Of Sunnybrook Farm.”

Within two years of the program’s inception, more than 100,000 people in mountain communities received regular visits from the librarians, and over 155 schools awaited their visits.

Though considered highly successful, the program ended in 1943 when President Roosevelt severed funding for the project. Demand for workers to fuel military efforts of World War II put the previously unemployed back to work.

But when the program folded, its legacy was evident: Nearly 1,000 literary equestriennes had served Kentucky residents in 48 counties, cementing the pack horse librarians’ place in history. ❷