

The First Bookmobile

Washington County, Maryland

The first bookmobile in the United States was introduced in Washington County, Maryland in 1905. Mary Titcomb, the first librarian of Washington County Free Library, Maryland, considered seriously the need for the library to become a County Library. Her task was to get books in homes throughout the county, not just in Hagerstown, the county seat. The first step was to send boxes of books on the Library Wagon to the general store or the post office in small towns and villages throughout the county. By 1904 boxes with 30 volumes each were sent to 66 deposit stations, to extend the reach of the library and manage the practical distribution to the books.

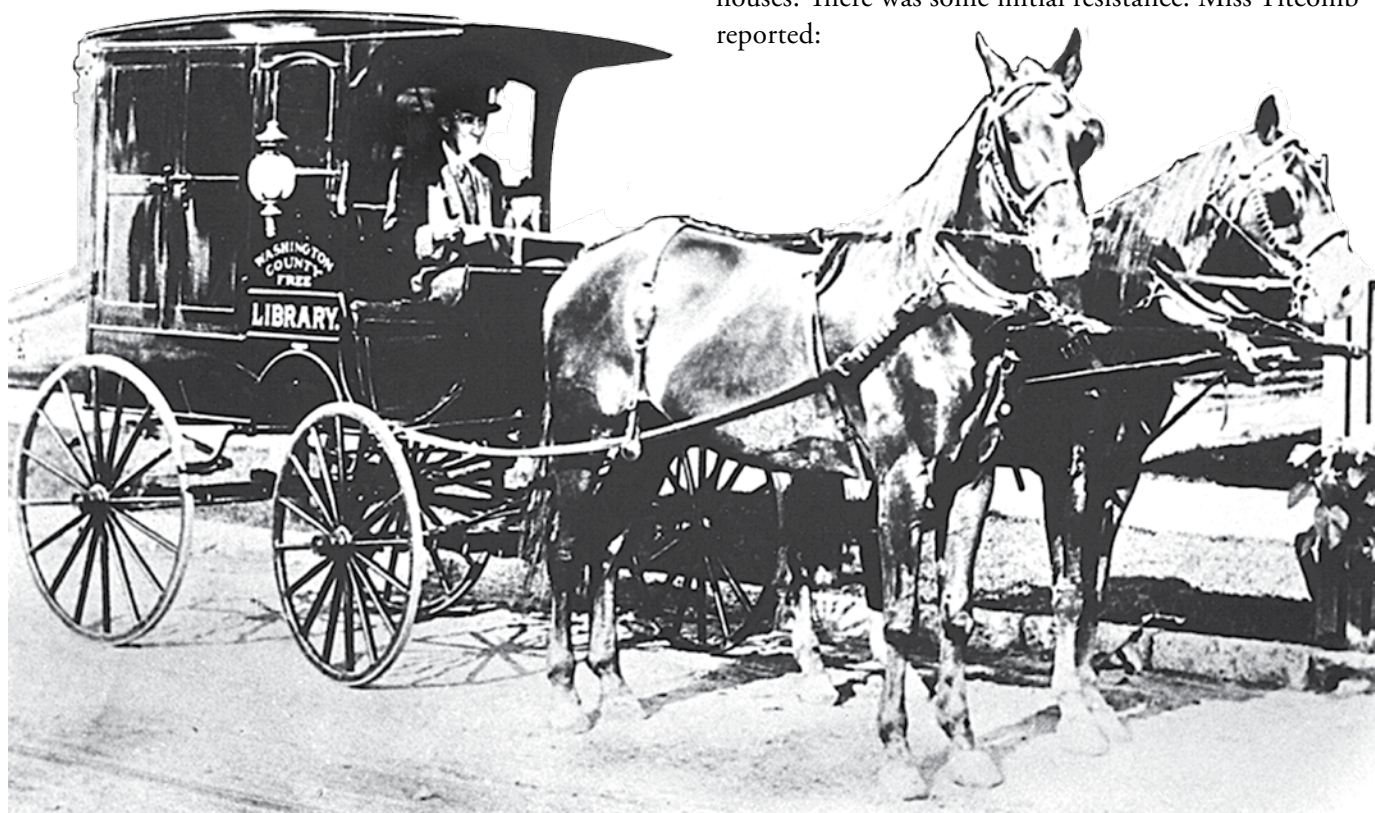
But Miss Titcomb was not satisfied. As she wrote in *The Story of the Washington County Free Library*:

Would not a Library Wagon, the outward and visible signs of the service for which the Library stood, do much more in cementing friendship? Would the upkeep of the wagon after the first cost be much more than the present method? Is not Washington County with its good roads especially well adapted for testing an experiment of this kind, for the geography of the

County is such that it could be comfortably covered by well planned routes? These and other aspects of the plan were laid before the Board of Trustees – who approved of the idea, and forthwith the librarian began interviewing wagon makers and trying to elucidate her ideas with pen and pencil. The first wagon, when finished with shelves on the outside and a place for storage of cases in the center resembled somewhat a cross between a grocer's delivery wagon and the tin peddler's cart of by gone New England days. Filled with an attractive collection of books and drawn by two horses, with Mr. Thomas the janitor both holding the reins and dispensing the books, it started on its travels in April 1905.

No better method has ever been devised for reaching the dweller in the country. The book goes to the man, not waiting for the man to come to the book. Psychologically too the wagon is the thing. As well try to resist the pack of a peddler from the Orient as the shelf full of books when the doors of the wagon are opened by Miss Chrissinger at one's gateway.

The wagon, driven by Joshua Thomas, covered many miles over the county roads delivering books to remote houses. There was some initial resistance. Miss Titcomb reported:



When directions were given as to painting, we had the fear of looking too much like the laundry wagon before our eyes, and the man was strictly enjoined, not to put any gilt or scroll work on it but to make even the lettering, "Washington County Free Library," plain and dignified, directions carried out only too well, for in the early days of our wagoning, as our man approached one farm house, he heard a voice charged with nervous trepidation, call out "Yer needn't stop here. We ain't got no use for the dead wagon here." Suffice it to say, that we promptly painted the wheels red, and picked off the panels of the doors with the same cheerful color.

In August 1910 the original book wagon was destroyed. While crossing the Norfolk and Western Railroad track at St. James a freight train ran into it leaving literally nothing but fragments. In 1912 a motorized book wagon was introduced, the first of a long fleet of vehicles, taking books to the men, women and children of Washington County, Maryland, not just those in the rural areas, but those in senior citizen homes, head start programs, schools and many other county residences.

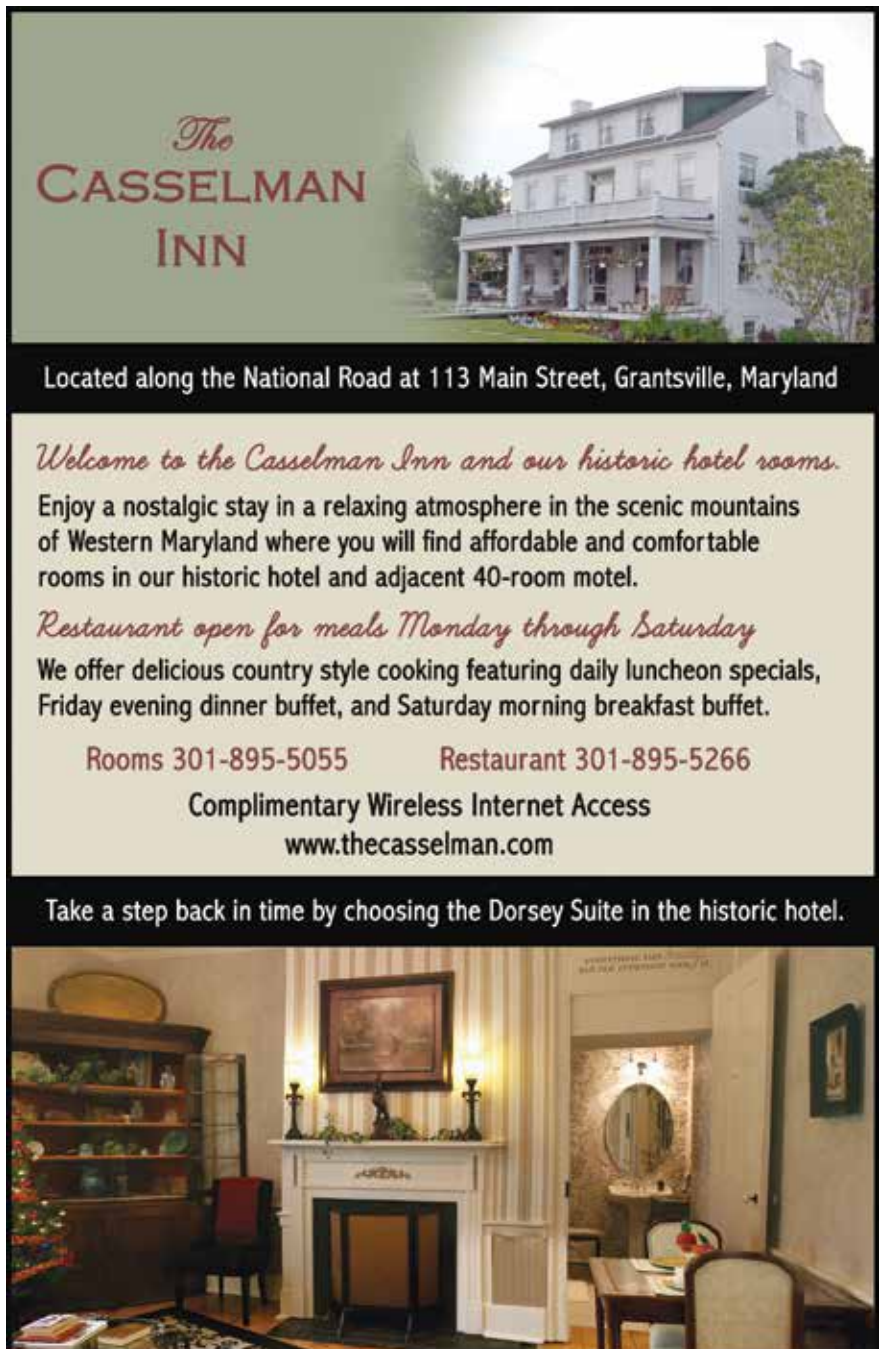
As Miss Titcomb noted: "Any account of this first Book Wagon work, the first in the United States would be incomplete without the statement that this method of rural library extension has been adopted in many states in the Union, and that new book wagons are being put in operation each year." Indeed bookmobiles are now found as part of many library systems around the world, utilizing vans and buses, but also boats, camels and even donkeys. From the first "perambulating library" in Warrington, England in 1858 to the first 20th century book wagon in the United States in 1905, to the more modern book and media delivery systems, libraries are still taking their wares to an appreciative public.



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