Library on Wheels

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A CASUAL OBSERVER passing the elementary school of Neulussheim, a little town of 3,600 population in Mannheim county, late on a certain Thursday afternoon is apt to wonder why the school yard is still crowded with children long after classes are over.

Both boys and girls linger there in groups, and all of them are carrying books—two or three or four.

What is this? Has the younger German generation developed a thirst for knowledge so great that after-school fun is forgotten?

The answer is provided with the appearance down the street of a large blue-painted truck which slows as it approaches the school, turns and rolls into the yard. The children, galvanized into action, rush to meet it, waving their books in greeting. This is one of the Thursdays marking the biweekly visit to Neulussheim of the Mannheim US Information Center's bookmobile. They are library, not textbooks, which the students carry.

The center's free library service to rural communities is extended to eight small towns and villages within a radius of 30 miles from Mannheim—where either German library facilities are rare or residents are unable to pay for them. The Mannheim bookmobile is the first of 20 libraries on wheels planned for West Germany's rural readers to be put into operation.

ALTHOUGH IT DRAWS from 5,000 volumes on its storage shelves in Mannheim, the bookmobile has room for only 4,000. With few exceptions, the books are German translations of English language publications. Two, three and sometimes 10 copies of a single title are available. The rolling library is operated on the same open-shelf system as the libraries in the city-located US Information Centers.

The eight communities among which the bookmobile circulates have a total population of 36,000. Recent statistics for a single month show a circulation in the entire area of 3,490 books and 633 magazines.

Designed primarily to meet rural standards, readers are nevertheless offered a wide range of selection, including, besides fiction and non-fiction, material in the information and entertainment fields and many American magazines. Picture displays showing various phases of life in the United States are concealed in the bookmobile's sidewalks, and these are uncovered at each stop.

Miss Barbara Fuenter, librarian in charge of the bookmobile, says that reader interest is a good indication of the social and educational standards of the communities. The number of the bookmobile's patrons has grown markedly, she said, since the library began its circuit the first of the year. Even Kurt Streckenbach, driver of

Ladenburg town crier and posters announce bookmobile.

First US bookmobile draws up in Ladenburg's market place.

Cover Photograph
The first bookmobile operated by the US Information Centers program in Germany is shown during a visit to Ketch, a town of 4,800 population near Mannheim, in Wuerttemberg-Baden. All photos by Jacoby, ID HICOG
the bookmobile, has been pressed into service as a librarian to accommodate all comers.

In Neulussheim, the rolling library has approximately 350 patrons, two thirds of whom are elementary school children from the fifth to the eighth grades. Half of these are girls. While the boys are mostly interested in books of adventure or the ever-popular stories about American Indians, the girls prefer fairy tales or the "Mafatu," and for her mother, Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." To Ruth's family, free library service is a boon: Ruth's father did not return from the war and her mother supports the family from a small public welfare pension and by taking in sewing.

* "In einem andern Land," which is the German title, translated directly is "In Another Country."

Ketch pupils return books borrowed last visit — want more.

To families such as this, and indeed, to many book-loving Germans in better position financially than the Isbergers, books are luxury items because prices are so high.

Karl Senn, principal of the Neulussheim school, reports that the influence of the good reading provided to students by the bookmobile is already reflected in their schoolwork in the comparatively short time the rolling library has served the community. The children are adding to their vocabularies, they show better choice in the structure of sentences, and there is a marked improvement in their knowledge of geography, he says.

They have also become interested in the national characteristics and ways of life of the people of the United States and other countries, and this, Mr. Senn declares, is a valuable aid to their general education. Famous volumes of world literature available on the bookmobile shelves will further enlarge their scope of understanding of nations other than their own.

Of immediate benefit, teachers say, is the fact that children exposed to good books from the start are less tempted to read the cheap, lurid publications which might well lead them into juvenile delinquency.

On the bookmobile's second visit to Edingen, a village of 1,800 residents, readers borrowed 112 novels, 34 books for young people, 21 biographies, and more...
rent and past history, 14 on social and educational science, nine travelogues, nine natural science and medical volumes, seven books on literature, seven on art, four on philosophy and three on religion. Some high school and commercial school students selected English-language publications to improve their knowledge of English.

Edingen's approximately 250 patrons are all older than 14 years, and they represent all social classes. Adult readers take more time to browse, studying carefully titles and frontispieces, and often asking the librarian for advice as to what they should choose.

Ladenburg, too, has many older patrons. In that community, arrival of the bookmobile is announced by the town crier, and within a matter of minutes, the rolling library parked in Ladenburg's ancient marketplace, is surrounded by book-loving residents.

Before a new community is added to the bookmobile's itinerary, town officials are contacted by Miss Naomi Huber, director of the Mannheim US Information Center, and Librarian Fuerer to ascertain whether or not its services are desired. In general, community officials welcome the idea principally because the bookmobile widens the usually narrow choice of books in the town and thus cuts down the selection of Schund (trash) by its younger residents.

Sometimes, however, the bookmobile could provide competition which might work a hardship, such as in the community where there is a circulating library owned and operated by a widow who derives her only source of income from it. Because the widow would be sure to suffer financially from such competition, the community was ruled out of the bookmobile's itinerary.

OPERATION OF THE library on wheels is distinctly a rush affair now as the crowd of readers is increasing with each swing of the circuit, and the two-member staff is hard pressed in meeting schedules set for each community.

Mornings are devoted to making selections for the day's trip, loading and unloading cases of books and making out the report and statistical survey on those lent the day before. The trip starts early in the afternoon and ends late in the evening.

Even though readers are often impatient and the children, especially, often undisciplined, Miss Fuerer and Mr. Streckenbach find their long hours of work rewarding. "We welcome new bookmobile fans," the librarian said, "because we know that with each new one we are helping to widen the perspective of the reading public we serve and are thus contributing more and more to Germany's growing democracy." +END