

## “San Diego’s Bookmobiles”

It was an instant success. The launching of the San Diego Public Library’s bookmobile on Sept. 21, 1948 excited patrons, particularly school kids, and made library service possible throughout greater San Diego. Carrying 2000 books, a librarian and a clerk-driver, the bookmobile visited elementary schools and shopping centers, and circulated 90 books per hour, more than any branch library in San Diego.

The mobile library addressed the growing desire in San Diego for reading material in areas that lacked school or branch libraries. In 1948 the city had not built a branch library in twenty years even though the population had grown from an estimated 145,000 in 1928 to a post-World War II high of 367,000. As a roving library-on-wheels, the bookmobile brought needed service to new subdivisions in the expanding city.



San Diego Public Library’s first bookmobile at Stockton Elementary School at 3109 Island in 1948. *San Diego Public Library*

The first bookmobile was a 23-foot long van, bought from the Kalamazoo Coach Co. in Michigan for \$8,000. In outward appearance it resembled a window-less school bus. But its eight-foot wide interior held 170 feet of shelving, one desk, interior lights, and separate entry and exit doors. There was room for 20 people to browse the collection, half of which were children’s titles.

The bookmobile visited a dozen locations weekly, stopping two or three hours at each site. It could perform most services of a larger branch library. Special book or reference requests were directed to the main library on E Street.

A second van was bought in 1956 for \$13,500. Bookmobile II, called “Goliath” by the staff, was 26-feet long and held three thousand books. With two vehicles, the Public Library extended service to 15 locations and stops of four hours each. All the stops included after-school hours for children. Most popular were two community stops, which lasted from 1:30 to 8:30 p.m.

The first bookmobiles were reliable vehicles and ran well with only modest maintenance. “Never even a flat tire,” said driver Sandy Long in 1958. She did recall one night in Claremont when the fog was so bad they needed to phone for a car to pilot them home.

Electrical power for the bookmobiles could be a problem. At their regular stops the drivers hooked up the vans to external sources with a heavy-duty extension cord to power the lights. If power was unavailable, the bookmobile closed shop when the daylight failed.

With the region continuing to develop the city bought a third vehicle in 1959. The city's area nearly tripled between 1950 and 1970, expanding from 107 square miles to 316. New annexations meant new subdivisions—all expecting library service.

The three bookmobiles served a wide area: north as far as Del Mar, south almost to the Mexican border, and east to San Carlos. Bookmobile schedules were continually adjusted to reach people not served by branches.

The library's original 1948 bookmobile was retired in 1962, replaced by a 32-foot van built by Gerstenslager of Wooster, Ohio. But with the construction of several new branch libraries in the 1960s, circulation numbers began to drop for the vehicles. One bookmobile was temporarily pulled from service in 1970, returned a year and half later, then eliminated entirely in January 1975. City budget cutters claimed another vehicle in July, leaving just one operating bookmobile.



Elementary students in 1964. *San Diego Public Library*

The city's last bookmobile was a \$37,000 vehicle bought in December 1973. It was 35-ft. long and 11'7" high. When fully loaded with about 4,000 books, the bookmobile weighed 12.5 tons. The library expected the van to last fifteen years.

Years of hard service followed before the bookmobile was sidelined in September 1985 for an extensive mechanical overhaul and remodeling. Air-conditioning was new, and a generator was added to provide power at all stops. Eye-catching blue graphics were painted on the vehicle sides, showing literary figures from adult and children's books. After spending over \$25,000 on the renovations, the city premiered the "new" bookmobile in January 1986.

Now a "billboard on wheels," the bookmobile appeared at community events such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Parade, Kidz Artz in Balboa Park, and Kid's Day at the (Mission) Bay. Regular stops included retirement communities, senior centers, and social service agencies, as well as a number of elementary schools.

It was rewarding work for the bookmobile staff. Library Assistant Maria Biondo-Longton enjoyed doing story times at shopping centers and county parks. "People were so nice to us and so faithful since every other week was their only library service."

Library Assistant and driver Bob Cronk remembered stops in low-income areas that lacked nearby libraries: "I have to say that our patrons were very appreciative. We also stopped at quite a few schools and the surrounding neighborhoods. We had children that used to visit us regularly. . . I really enjoyed working with all of these people. It was like being part of a really big extended family."

On one occasion, Cronk’s vehicle was in a neighborhood when a canyon fire broke out, threatening homes and an apartment complex. “We helped neighbors contain the fire with hoses and fire extinguishers until the fire department got there.”

By the early 1990s mechanical problems for the vehicle became frequent. With afflictions ranging from a leaky roof to balky brakes, the bookmobile was out of service on 28 occasions in 1992-93. Bob Cronk recalled an embarrassing breakdown on Highway 8 that jammed the late afternoon commute. “It just died and we coasted to the side of the freeway. A mobile crew came out from Chollas and eventually got it running again.”

The bookmobile had been scheduled for retirement in 1989 but money was never appropriated for a replacement. San Diego Gas & Electric considering donating a new vehicle in 1993 costing \$150,000, but the gift never came through.

Budget woes loomed in 1997. The costs of operating the bookmobile had grown but book circulation had dropped. “Let’s thank the bookmobile for long and distinguished service,” said Library Commissioner Mike Madigan. The commissioners voted unanimously to recommend halting the service, which ended on September 12, 1997.



Three bookmobiles served San Diego in the 1960s. *San Diego Public Library*

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