



Library on Wheels: Mary Lemist Titcomb and America's First Bookmobile

Sharlee Glenn

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If you can't bring the man to the books, bring the books to the man.

Mary Lemist Titcomb (1852–1932) was always looking for ways to improve her library. As librarian at the Washington County Free Library in Maryland, Titcomb was concerned that the library was not reaching all the people it could. She was determined that *everyone* should have access to the library—not just adults and those who lived in town. Realizing its limitations and inability to reach the county's 25,000 rural residents, including farmers and their families, Titcomb set about to change the library system forever with the introduction of book-deposit stations throughout the country, a children's room in the library, and her most revolutionary idea of all—a horse-drawn Book Wagon. Soon book wagons were appearing in other parts of the country, and by 1922, the book wagon idea had received widespread support. The bookmobile was born!

Library on Wheels: Mary Lemist Titcomb and America's First Bookmobile Details

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Abby Johnson says

Did you know that America's first bookmobile was invented by a lady librarian who just would not quit? Charged with serving the 500-square-mile Washington County in Maryland, librarian Mary Lemist Titcomb would stop at nothing to ensure that as many residents of her county were served as possible. This meant setting up book deposit boxes throughout the county, holding story hours in rural areas, and purchasing a horse-drawn wagon to travel hundreds of miles in the county each year, bringing books to people.

Of course as a librarian, this book spoke to me and I am so glad to learn about this librarian that I didn't know anything about. Tons of archival photos accompany a succinct text, illuminating the struggle of traveling those rugged roads and the accomplishment in serving so many people in the county.

Hand this to every outreach librarian you know and to kids who love libraries, especially those served by the Bookmobile!

Angela says

"Do all in your power to make the library useful. Do not make the mistake of thinking children are of no consequence. If there is any preference, let it be shown to them."

As a children's librarian, I have a special kind of love for this book. The story is inspiring and the photographs are super cool. Thank you, Sharlee Glenn, for researching and sharing this amazing woman's story with the world.

Linda says

I have read Biblioburro by Jeannette Winter, Miss Dorothy and Her Bookmobile by Gloria Houston, My Librarian Is A Camel: How Books Are Brought to Children Around the World by Margriet Ruurs, and now, this marvelous one about the woman who created the first bookmobile in the U.S by Sharlee Glenn.

Mary Lemist Titcomb was born in 1852, fortunate enough to have parents who allowed her to continue her education, and the story tells that as her brothers began leaving for careers like medicine, Mary wanted to do something, too. Few careers were open to women at that time other than nursing or teaching. Fortunately, the field of librarianship was just emerging and Mary was excited about the idea of working with books and sharing them with others. There was no formal way to become educated in this new career, so Mary moved to Concord, Massachusetts and began working there as an unpaid intern. She never stopped fulfilling her passion for the library. The book is detailed, including numerous photos and documents about Mary's career. She moved from place to place, never failing to succeed in improving what libraries meant, to her and to her patrons!

Mary ended her career as the head of a brand new library in Washington County, Maryland, a mostly rural county. Some did not like that a "newcomer" was hired. Some thought it silly to even open a library. Rural people didn't have time to read! When it opened, crowds arrived and never stopped. Mary seemed to have found a real home.

Mary opened one of the first children's rooms in the nation. She was frustrated, however, knowing that her library and the books were not reaching the county's many rural people. She made sure that outlying school had a good supply of books. She started a storytelling hour in different areas. And, similar to today's "little free libraries" except they were lending ones, Mary started "book deposit stations", small libraries where people could check out books.

They still weren't serving ALL the people in remote areas. Mary thought of a library on wheels, a horse-drawn "book-wagon". And it worked and those days when it arrived at a destination, people came in "from the fields, the barns, and the house." This was 1905, and sadly, this particular first wagon was hit by a train. The driver and the horses were okay; the wagon and books were not. Onward they went, and the next was a "horseless carriage".

Clichéd it is, but the rest is history! Others heard of Mary's idea and success and began copying it with their own bookmobiles. The story is wonderfully written by Sharlee Glenn with a note from her, extra personal information, notes, a bibliography, acknowledgments, image credits and an index.

I grew up in a small town until middle school. There was no close library. We had books, but not many, and the bookmobile saved my reading life, along with the woman librarian who drove it. Each time it came, she had special books to show me, books she thought I would enjoy. She took time to talk to me about what I read, what I liked. I remember the clank, clank up those metal stairs to that "world of books". And I am grateful still for my bookmobile, thus grateful for Mary Lemist Titcomb who began this extraordinary (at the time) outreach with books to people who were far from her (their) library.

Jan Polep says

Whatta gal! This fun scrapbook look at early times in Washington County, Maryland tells of Miss Titcomb's library innovations at a time when one brick and mortar library was to serve a whole county. She decided to take the books to the people and came up with the idea of America's first horse drawn bookmobile, so that the County's rural residents could have access to the library's collections. She also made sure the library had a room just for children (most libraries at that time didn't) and established deposit collections in schools and other "deposit stations" around the county. Aimed at Grades 3-7...this one is really for all of us.

Pamela says

MOST EXCELLENT!!!

Excellent: Not simply because it's a historically enlightening book-about-books with library as a key component, though that alone would be enough; it's also a rich biography with WONDERFUL photos about a generous, big-hearted woman ahead of her time who made literacy available to the underserved, hardworking rural families, thus benefiting all. Because anything - community included - is only as strong as its weakest link.

Thank you Sharlee Glenn for giving young and old alike this fabulous history/biography book to treasure! Mary Lemist Titcomb is greatly deserving of being recognized among other pioneering women in the annals

of history.

FIVE ***** Women Worth Celebrating, Photos Worth Studying, Readably Simple Books Worth Reading
***** STARS

Becky says

Library on Wheels: Mary Lemist Titcomb and America's First Bookmobile. 2018. Sharlee Glenn. Abrams. 56 pages. [Source: Review copy]

First sentence: Mary Lemist Titcomb grew up wanting to do things. The problem was, people were always telling her that she couldn't. She couldn't do this, because she was too young. She couldn't do that, because she was a girl, or because her family didn't have enough money, or because it just wasn't practical. But Mary never gave up.

Premise/plot: Library On Wheels is about a pioneer librarian, Mary Lemist Titcomb. Librarianship was a new field when she came of age, and it wasn't an accepted field for women. (Not like teaching or nursing.) But Titcomb was diligent, determined, and ambitious. It wasn't only that librarianship was a brand new field but that public libraries were brand new as well. Titcomb's vision of what could be--what should be--would have a lasting impact.

The library she would have the biggest impact on perhaps was Washington County Free Library. (This wasn't her very first library to work.) The Washington County Free Library was the second county-wide library in the U.S. (I believe this is in 1901).

It had been established for all the residents of Washington County, but over half of them--some 25,000 people--lived far from town, on farms scattered across nearly 500 square miles. How to get the library's books to them?

Miss Titcomb was determined that everyone should have access to the library--not just adults, not just the rich or educated, not just those who lived in town. She was absolutely unwavering in her dedication to this vision. First, she opened a children's room in the library--one of the first in the nation. She also made sure that all the outlying village schools had a good rotating supply of books and pictures from the library. Then she started a storytelling hour in remote areas to get the country children excited about books and reading.

Next, she set up book deposit stations throughout the county. These served as small branch libraries where people could check out books, then return the ones they had already read...

But her biggest accomplishment was her vision of having book wagons deliver books to the people.

"The book goes to the man. We do not wait for the man to come to the book."

The book wagon made its maiden voyage in April 1905. Although Miss Titcomb rode along whenever she could, she still had her duties to fulfill back at the main library, so Mr. Joshua Thomas, the library janitor, was enlisted to be the driver. The wagon was pulled by a pair of dapper horses named Black Beauty and Dandy.

I loved, loved, loved that Mr. Thomas listed his profession as **BOOK MISSIONARY** in the 1910 census.

The book wagon evolved through the years--especially after a tragic accident with a train. This book tells a remarkable story of that evolution and the extraordinary librarian behind it.

My thoughts: I loved this one. I did. I absolutely loved it. I think it is for all ages. Yes, it's a nonfiction book for middle grade, but, it's so much more than that. I think it is for anyone and everyone who has ever loved a book or loved a library. I found it fascinating. There are so many pictures!!! They just weren't that many awesome nonfiction books when I was a kid.

Joshua says

I'm slightly biased about this book. I work in a library and so a children's book about Bookmobile's immediately caught my attention. But this book hasn't made my list purely because of my profession, it deserves all the credit it's due because it manages to tell an incredible story about a woman who wanted to change her world and make her community stronger by offering access to information and books. Along with the writing, which is extensive, this book also fills its pages with real photographs promising children a chance to see how libraries looked and functioned in a pre-information age. This book is sure to be a valuable resource for children who are curious about libraries, how they work, and where they've come from.

Josiphine/Tessa says

This was a great read on one of the library world's greats. There are a lot of old photographs and primary sources included. I enjoyed it a lot.

Ms. Yingling says

Public Library Copy

It's hard to imagine that there weren't always public libraries, but the idea didn't really start to catch on until the 1890s (when my grandmother was born!). Mary Lemist Titcomb came from a poor family but made sure that she became educated. After finishing high school in 1873, she took an internship to become a librarian. After being denied a position at the Chicago World's Fair's Women's Building Library in 1893 by Melvil Dewey because she wasn't widely known outside her community, she stepped up her game and devoted herself to promoting innovative library services. She installed library boxes throughout her county in stores and private homes, if necessary. Fearing that farmers at the outer reaches of her district did not have books, she created a book wagon in 1905 to take on rounds while keeping the library building open! She was a

consummate professional and no doubt the most "famous" librarian of her time.

Glenn has done exhaustive research to fill in spares facts, and since there are relatively few photographs of the time, she has done a great job of locating pictures that show, for example, what Mary might have looked like when she was a girl. The photos are all explained, but this will go far in giving modern children a better feel for the time. I love that Glenn was so dedicated to her topic that she helped get donations to put up a gravestone for Mary and her sister!

Appelt's Down Cut Shin Creek: The Pack Horse Librarians of Kentucky (April 24th 2001, HarperCollins) remains steadily popular in my library, so I'm definitely going to purchase a copy of this. It's beautifully formatted, and a fun, easy read. Plus, Titcomb is a great example of a woman who did not take "no" for an answer, so would make a great topic (if hard to research!) for a National History Day project. Pair this one with Farrell's Fannie Fannie Never Flinched: One Woman's Courage in the Struggle for American Labor Union Rights (November 1st 2016, Abrams Books for Young Readers), or, if you are silly enough to have Parnassus on Wheels on your library shelves since 1969, use Library on Wheels as an excuse to continue to hold onto Morley's fun novel.

Peggy Hess Greenawalt says

This book is a wonderful researched piece of history from Maryland with excellent photos. Mary Lemist Titcomb was quite a woman and a remarkable librarian. This book would make a great discussion with upper elementary kids and a nice gift for book lovers and librarians. Loved Mr. Thomas calling himself a book missionary. Maybe that is what all old school librarians are these days as technology takes on paper. What joy when the horse and then the horseless wagon came to your homes and barns in the early 1900's. This is a young people's non-fiction read to be savored.

Tina says

Ms. Titcomb let her passion and love of reading lead her to wonderful heights. She became a librarian whose determination led to the creation of the first bookmobile. She made sure that books could get to the hands of all those in the county that she served. This book is a lovely tribute to her with very cool old photos to boot.

Donalyn says

Fascinating book about the life and work of one of America's most influential librarians, Mary Lemist Titcomb.

Kris Dersch says

This book had me at the dedication: "For Mary and all the other unsung heroines of history." Sigh. If only all biographies for kids were like this. It's brief. It reads more like a picture book biography, except instead of illustrations the visuals are photos

and ephemera: maps, a school catalog, a newspaper article, etc.

Part of the reason that it is brief is because there isn't much information about this fascinating woman, as the author details in the back matter, the part of the book that takes it from 4 stars to 5. She outlines her research process, speaking with Miss Titcomb's grand nieces and nephews (Mary Titcomb had no children.) In the end, when the author realized Miss Titcomb was buried in an unmarked grave near famed author Louisa May Alcott, she (the author, Sharlee Glenn) became more than biographer and actually spearheaded the effort to fundraise for a headstone. This work is clearly personal to this author, as bookmobiles are so personal to those that they serve, and I'm so glad this book exists to chronicle that history.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Miss Titcomb is the kind of librarian I wish I had been. No matter what she put her mind to, she got it done. She had vision, and she knew how to make those visions reality. She was ahead of her time, creating in Washington County, Maryland, a library that truly served all the different types of people in the region, no matter where they lived. One of the ways she brought books to the people was with the use of a book wagon, which later became what we know today as the bookmobile.

What I liked most about this book was all the pictures of the bookmobile as it evolved through time. The first one held 200 books, and each subsequent bookmobile held more. It amazes me to think how these books transformed lives. "Children who had never owned a book in their lives suddenly could borrow dozens at a time!" (p.29). How empowering!

Sadly, the bookmobile today is becoming a thing of the past. People are mobile and easily able to go to where the books are, plus ebooks, audiobooks, and mail-order books also bring reading to their doors. Glenn's book reminds us that there was a time when this service fulfilled a need in the community. I'm so glad she wrote it, and how nice of her to get Miss Titcomb a proper gravestone. I highly recommend this book for everyone, not just librarians.

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Brenda says

Written by a lady from Utah, who discovered that the first bookmobile was thought of and organized by a woman librarian. Short, informative, with many photos, including some of the old book wagon and farm children gathered round to trade their books.

I've always been fond of bookmobiles, since I remember going to the one that parked by the fire station in our town in Arkansas, when I was small. Of course someone had to dream it up first, before getting books out to rural communities. I'd just never paused to think about the lady who thought it up and deserves the tribute of this book.
