

Woman's Home Companion
April 1935

A Living Library

ANNA STEESE RICHARDSON

ILLUSTRATOR: GLEN MITCHELL

➤ HAND TRUCKS piled high with freshly laundered linen. Young inmates in white, looking self-important or self-conscious. Pretty probationers in seersucker uniforms. And everybody making way for our bookmobile.

It's library day in the City Hospital. We are in the general ward now, with women on one side of the corridor, men on the other. Young, middle-aged and very old. And all interested in the book truck and its librarian, who furnishes a welcome break in the day's monotony.

This is only one of many methods by which Gracia A. Countryman, head of the public library in Minneapolis, sends books into the lives of its people. Most librarians would be satisfied if 200,000 men, women and children from a total population of less than 500,000 were enrolled as borrowers of books, but not Miss Countryman. Her idea of service is taking books to those who otherwise might never know the joy of reading, into homes where the standard of reading is the comic strip. After forty years of service to her own city, after having been elected to the highest post in the library profession, President of the American Library Association, she is still outgelling her brains for new ways of reaching her neighbors with books.

The hospital library is only one of the outdoor services carried on by Miss Countryman. Its head is Mrs. E. B. Bailey, who started the work twelve years ago. Her staff now visits every hospital in Minneapolis on starred days of the week. Most of the patients know her. She has an almost uncanny gift for sensing their needs.

...*Feb.*, says an old German extending an eager hand.



"So you haf in your library a German Testament." He clutches the book eagerly, adjusts his pillow and starts reading without giving us another glance. His satisfaction is Mrs. Bailey's reward.

In the sun pavilion outside the ward a nervous young man watches the approach of the book truck. "Say, can you give me a Zane Grey book? Anything about the west? It's hell to be shut in here day after day! A western kinda takes me out of the hospital." Mrs. Bailey hands him the book with her cheerful smile. "That's just what books are for—to take us out of a world that doesn't look just right to us now."

The book truck rolls on. We are in the women's ward now. A patient in a pink bed jacket smiles happily at Mrs. Bailey. "No, I won't be wanting a book today. I'm going home tomorrow. But I've enjoyed the books you've brought me a lot, especially this Kathleen Norris story."

Mrs. Bailey takes the book which the young woman draws from under her pillow. "Now that you've enjoyed reading here, I hope you'll keep up the habit when you go home. There's a nice branch library near your home, I'm sure. If you'll give me your address, I'll send you a card to fill out."

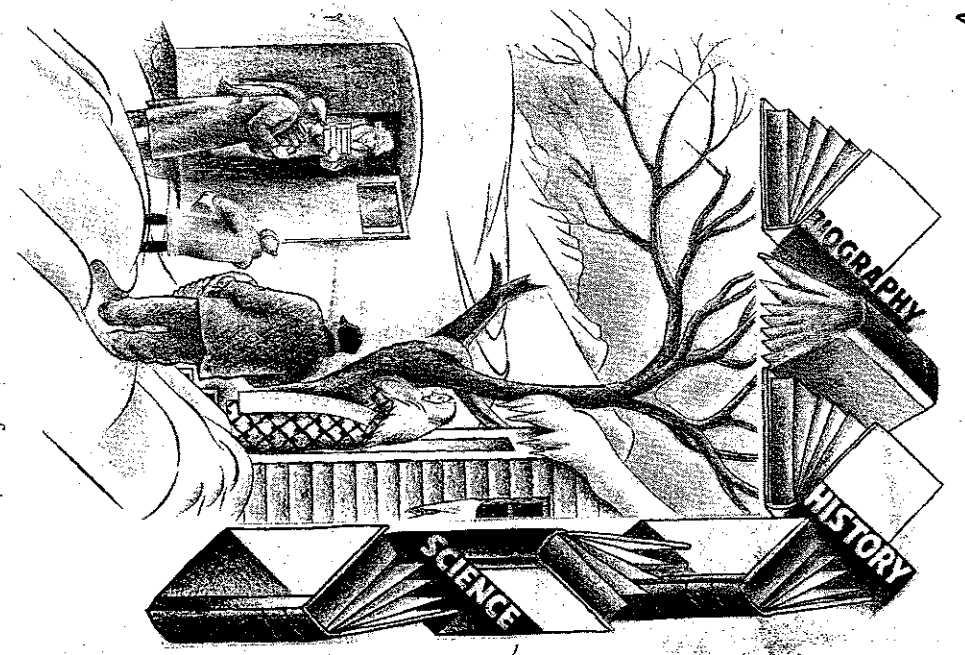
As we push the truck toward the next bed the hospital librarian says softly: "Many men and women learn to read while they are in the hospital. I recall one young mother who had never read anything much except newspaper advertisements when she came into this hospital. I first gave her motion picture magazines. When she left, she had gone through a course of magazine stories of the popular type and had read her first book. We graduate many a man and woman from this hospital into our branch libraries."

We return to the library located in the basement of the City Hospital. At the noon hour it is literally packed with doctors, internes, nurses, dietitians and probationers, all looking for what will help them in their work or entertain them in their brief leisure hours. This library is open and the bookmobile in action at the City Hospital two days in the week, from eight a. m. to five-thirty p. m. Mrs. Bailey and her eight aids, who are especially trained for the work, function in fifteen Minneapolis hospitals, public and private, the week round.

➤ WE ARE rolling away from Minneapolis now, through Hennepin County. It's a frosty day in January and the road winds ahead of us like a white ribbon. There are three of us on the seat, the truck librarian Miss Berry, and Karl, the fine upstanding Norwegian who can push the truck through any kind of road or weather. Believe it or not, this book truck makes five hundred and eight stops in Hennepin County every month, including eighty-six rural schools, twenty-two branch libraries and fourteen stations. The rest are farm homes, and as I like them best we'll talk about them first.

The truck stops as close to the house as it can get, often right at the back door. Out comes the mistress of the house, sometimes accompanied by her children under school age, a visiting relative or neighbor, to say nothing of her husband or the hired man. Each one carries some sort of container, a basket, a dishpan, a bucket or, when everything else fails, a gingham apron.

At the first stop the woman is almost reproachful. It seems the schedule has been



Each one carries some sort of container

changed from Thursday to Friday and she did not receive her notice of the change.

"I waited for you all day yesterday," she says as she climbs into the truck. Then she proceeds to select reading material for the family, while I listen shamelessly.

From immigrant to inventor by Pippin. I bet my Charlie'd like that. He's always makin' things. My Memories of Eighty Years by Chauncey Depew. My husband's father might like that. He's most elderly himself. John Brown's Body. My grandfather fought in the Civil War. I'd like to read it.

"Have you got a good love story? The kind that makes you believe in love, even if you live on a farm with a man and a mortgage?"

Many farm women like such writers as Temple Bailey, Kathleen Norris, Grace Livingston Hill, Margaret Ayer Barnes, Janet Fairbank, to say nothing of Gene Stratton Porter, whose books are still in great demand. One woman picks up a copy of A Girl of the Limberlost with the remark, "There don't seem to be anybody to carry on for her."

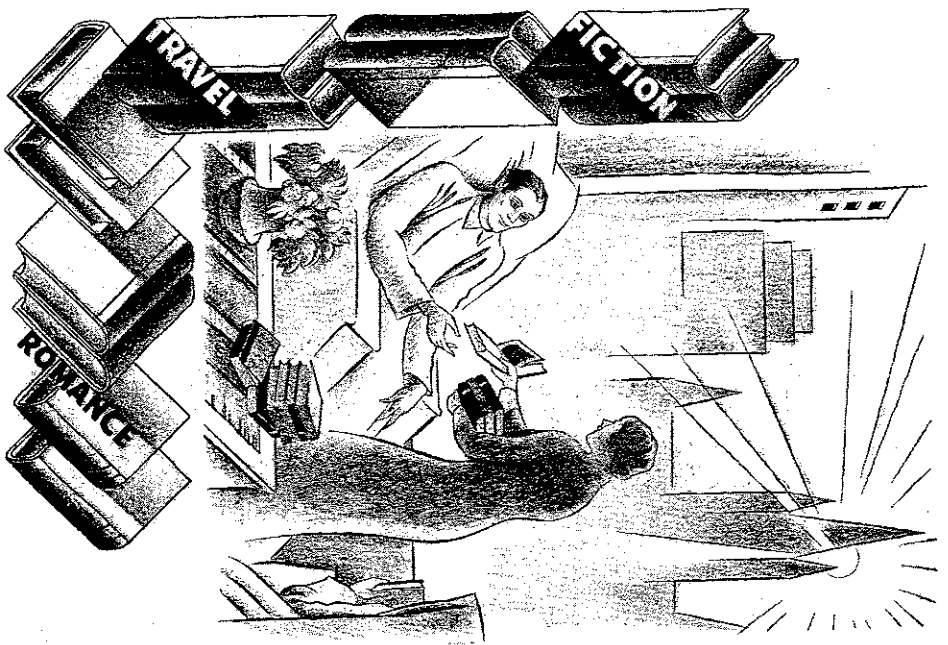
➤ WE NEXT visit a well-kept house, whose mistress may be bewildered by some of the titles but he does not question her judgment and is rewarded with three "westerns" for his own particular consumption. The interview closes with a fine exchange of compliments.

We go to schools varying in size from one room to four rooms, and everywhere it is the same. The children, and often their teacher, come rushing out, drawing on coats, sweaters and mufflers. Some of them carry waterproof containers for the books.

We stop at a library center in a grocery store. The garrulous proprietor in charge of the books fairly has the jitters because one book has disappeared from his limited stock. He is first surprised, then soothed, when he discovers that Miss Berry understands the ways of book-borrowers and is lenient with him.

We roll back to town and the lights shine in the great public library at Tenth and Hennepin Streets. We are going to have supper, but first we must see the business and municipal branch which is going to close at six o'clock sharp.

The air has changed. Sleet and snow are falling outside, but in this plain businesslike room dozens of men and women have thrown aside [CONTINUED ON PAGE 38]



"A western kinda takes me out of the hospital!"

Chicago's best #3

A Living Library

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11]

their hats and coats and are working feverishly over stock reports, government works on the income tax, telegraph codes, trade journals, directories of every city in the country, books on advertising, books on phrasing business letters, on municipal finance, maps of the state and city, geological and industrial maps. A few workers need material to be used in correspondence that must go out early the next day and they appeal for quick help to the efficient librarians.

"Say, I want some addresses of business firms in Waterloo, Iowa. Got anything on that?"

A member of the library staff points to a section devoted to directories, and sure enough, there is Waterloo, Iowa!

An eager young woman confides in the librarian: "If you can give me the information I want, maybe our firm can get a two thousand dollar contract with a company in Ecuador."

She finds the information in a book produced on the instant, and in ten minutes is on her way.

You'd think this might be a dull sort of library, but it isn't. Everybody's here because he has business here. Every girl who comes in is alert and efficient-looking. Only ten per cent of its patrons, however, are women. From eleven to two in the middle of the day the library hums like a beehive. Just before closing time the atmosphere is feverish.

WE STOP now for a hasty supper because something interesting is scheduled at the library later and we want to be there. Many things not usually found in libraries take place in this huge old-fashioned building. Tonight it's a class in public speaking. Representatives of the labor unions asked for it and an unemployed teacher of public speaking and debate is in charge. They are having a grand time, men and women together.

Another club which meets in the little lecture room of the library every Thursday afternoon interests me greatly. It is made up of well-educated women formerly employed in stores and in institutions as nurses and dietitians. Some of them are graduates of home economics colleges. All of them, being unable to secure positions in their respective lines, have gone into domestic service as housekeepers, cooks, nursemaids and general houseworkers. They asked Miss Countryman to form this club for study and discussion so that they might keep in touch with their former work and world affairs.

I spend a week in Minneapolis and I do not see half of what goes on in or through its library service, but I do spend a Sunday afternoon inside its walls, where only two rooms are open, the newspaper reading-room and the technical room. In the former there are no women readers. Some of the men come from the ranks of the unemployed and sit close to the big fireplace. I see one man holding his newspaper upside down. It's his ticket to warmth and a comfortable chair. Some of the men are homesick. Sunday is the one day when they can come to the public library and read the newspapers from Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. This newspaper room has become something of a social institution. It holds about two hundred and fifty men and every Christmas Eve a

friendly housewife sends a huge box of holiday cakes for its habitués.

In the technical room there is no leisure, but absorbed study of books and magazines, especially by men and women working on inventions or industrial problems.

IT'S MONDAY afternoon now and I'm in the art department with Miss Todd, its chief. It's like a beehive for men, women and children who love beauty or who want to develop it among their neighbors. Art books are here and many other attractions too. Two hundred and ten thousand pictures, which may be borrowed by women's clubs, school-teachers, lecturers, clergymen! They have a circulation of ninety thousand every year. There are eight thousand stereographic pictures and many stereoscopes, which can be borrowed for visual education in classes or in the family circle. One of the most interesting departments is devoted to lantern slides. There are slides on every subject for every type of organization or group, on child welfare work, on health for the family and the community, on the conservation of forests and on the extermination of flies, on interior decoration and on the Catacombs of Rome. Nearly every set of slides has a well-written lecture to go with it.

Commercial art demands also come to this department in large numbers. Immediately after prohibition was repealed there was a rush for help in designing trade marks for beer. And perhaps you don't know that Minneapolis is the center of the Christmas card industry. The art department of the library has thousands of Christmas cards in its files, which serve the artists for two purposes—they prevent duplication of design and they offer inspiration for new designs.

But pictures, lantern slides and clippings are only a part of this prize department of the Minneapolis Library. It has one of the finest collections in the country on architecture, design, costume, history of art and archeology. Students from all over the northwest use it, and the students from the Minneapolis School of Art and the State University's Schools of Architecture and Art are its constant patrons.

I wish there were space to describe the music department where thousands of sheets of music are circulated to the music pupils and music lovers of this musical city.

The corner in the library that I loved best was the nook where the readers adviser, Glenn Lewis, has his desk. The people who come to him want to get more out of life, largely by reading. I learned astonishing things as I sat beside his desk. Here are some of the books for which they ask:

They want to know how to study the fundamentals of English; how to develop appreciation of art, music and the drama; how to find joy as well as success in their business and professions. It seemed to me that every applicant for help at this desk wanted to enrich his or her life, and Glenn Lewis revels in responding to these needs. He has a short reading course in psychology and a longer list on the development of personality. He can

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 41]

A Living Library

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 38]

recommend a book on health of body and peace of mind, on vocabulary building or on short-story writing.

If a woman's club wants to study poetry Mr. Lewis can supply a program that will build the membership through sheer interest, and then the art department will illustrate it with prints or slides. If young people want to study the causes of unemployment, unemployment insurance, any of the problems confronting them as they leave school, Glenn Lewis has a reading course so interesting that they will not idle in a danger zone. But I really think the best thing that Glenn Lewis does is to listen when his clients tell him how they have been helped by a book or reading course that he has recommended. He builds his work on his readers' reports.

ONCE MORE we must travel, and to an outlying branch! Because here I have found what I think is the secret of the love which Minneapolis people have for their library and Gracia Countryman. It lies in a section largely occupied by Jewish families, but there have drifted into it other nationalities, especially from southern Europe, and not a few Negroes.

The day I visited this branch it was bitter cold. Indoors everything was cheerful. A fire on the hearth, bright pictures on the walls, the exquisite greens and mosses of the Minnesota woods banked everywhere. And everywhere I turned were foreign groups, young men and women, studying encyclopedias, books of travel, biographies of American men and women. In an alcove there was the usual array of low shelves, tables and chairs, and here wee folk were studying prints and picture books.

Up the icy steps, through the heavy door and straight to the central desk marched a stout mother with her two-year-old swathed in wool dress, sweater, muffler and shawl. She approached the presiding genius of the lending department without fear and with great confidence. "I leave Joseph while I go to market. It is a cold day." She turned toward the children's room.

"But," exclaimed the librarian, "this is not a nursery. It is a library where you borrow books. We do not take care of children."

"No-o-o? Ain't you got everything for children in the basement—a toilet and a place where they wash their hands before they take out the books? Ain't it warm here, and with little chairs for my Joseph? Ain't there children here that he can play with? My Joseph will stay." And Joseph was duly installed in one of the low chairs, with a picture book in front of him and a five-year-old girl on either side of him.

PERHAPS you say that all this is unconventional and without precedent. Perhaps! But a few days later I had good cause to remember little Joseph and his mother. A very tired and harassed board of estimate had held an all-night session for the purpose of revising the city budget, and they had cut the library appropriation fifty per cent. This would necessitate certain drastic cuts in the library service. The main library's branches would all be closed during

the summer vacation, which would mean that all the children out of school would be deprived of summer reading; or these libraries would be closed two weeks out of each month, which would mean that men and women needing help in an emergency couldn't have it. Or the salaries of all the librarians could be cut fifty per cent or more. But that sort of thing doesn't happen there.

Miss Marguerite Wells, president of the National League of Women Voters, gave a luncheon in her spacious home and invited as her guests leaders of women's groups, cultural, educational, civic and religious. She asked Miss Countryman what she thought should be done, and Miss Countryman presented a practical suggestion. The city could issue short-term bonds, which could be taken up later when larger appropriations for the library were in order. One of the guests suggested that the citizens of Minneapolis be informed of the disaster which threatened the library and be induced to demand the issuing of the short-term bonds. This the group of public-spirited women voted to do.

I LEFT Minneapolis a day or two later. I never heard how the campaign was organized and directed, but I soon heard that the bonds had been issued and the Minneapolis Library, with all its branches in the city and all its work throughout Hennepin County, was functioning as usual.

Behind any successful institution stands a personality. Behind the Minneapolis Library stands Gracia Countryman. The library is her workshop, her profession, her recreation, her hobby. The contentment and pleasure of its readers are her happiness.

All large cities, and some that are not so large, have fine public libraries whose activities are directed by able men and women, but only in Minneapolis have I found a librarian who sends information and inspiration out into the highways and the byways. For here is a new conception of the public library. Miss Countryman does not see it merely as rendering service to those who ask for service. She sees it as carrying help, pleasure, enrichment into the lives of citizens who would never ask for it because they know nothing about it. She believes that the public library should be publicized and popularized for the taxpayers, for everyone who lives within the gates of the city who might be benefited by its service. In her annual address to the American Library Association when she retired as president at the annual convention in Montreal, June, 1934, Miss Countryman set forth her faith in libraries thus:

"Ignorance has always been a menace to civilization. The world has progressed by ideas, by thinking, and we are going to work out a new world society, not with arms but with brains. Men and women who are studying and thinking are fitting themselves for the new conditions they must live in. As I have watched the throngs in our reading-rooms I have thought not so much of the leisure time which they were trying to fill as the habits of reading and thinking which were fitting them, whether they realized it or not, to adjust themselves to new situations."