

8

Louise Beckelman

interviewed by

Mrs. J.A. Burgess

September 1975

Ruby Schmidt Collection of BiCentennial Interviews

ORAL HISTORIES OF FORT WORTH, INC.

7

Mrs. Louise Beckelman
2727 Forest
Public Library

Mrs. Louise Beckleman
2727 Forest
Handley Area
Fort Worth, Texas

Interviewer: Mrs. Beckleman, would you tell us about your early work at the library?

Mrs. Beckleman: I went to work in the Fort Worth Public Library in 1925 as an apprentice and worked three months. At that time you worked a six-months apprenticeship, and then if you qualified and there was a vacancy, they considered you for permanent employment. In February I graduated from the old Central High School, now Paschal High School, and Mrs. Shuford, the librarian, called saying that with three months' work I had done, if I wanted to take a job, she would give me two weeks' trial; I started to work February 2, 1926. On February 2, 1926 when I started working at the public library at \$40.00 per month, we worked from 8:30 to 6:00 six days a week. This was the groundwork that fortified me to begin the first bookmobile service in our part of Texas some 22 years later. I suppose that I am considered a regular staffer by now, for on February 1, 1969, I celebrated my 43rd anniversary in the library. Many changes have come about in those 43 years.

The old red stone building with the tree on the lawn christened by Teddy Roosevelt, to the building we use today, plus six bookmobiles, 14 county branches, and a defeated bond election to expand our services -- this I have experienced from 1926 to 1947.

While working in the main circulation department, however, there was no departmental organization until 1931 with the opening of the present library. Actually, there were ten staff members when I was employed, including the janitor. We worked every phase of librarianship, from polishing the marble statute to detailed reference requests. I was soon made an assistant at the circulation desk, which spurred my ambition and greatly inflated my ego. Not until I was much older did I realize I was the only one working with the joint reference library, and their choices were limited. My big moment came when two years later I was raised to \$50.00 per month and told I could be in charge of the circulation desk because I showed such unusual interest for a young gal. By this time I had found the man in my life, and upon telling Mrs. Shuford, the librarian, I was going to be married during my vacation, she gave me the most stern lecture a nineteen-year-old ever got. I was shocked at the words she so forcefully said to me, "Anybody can get married; the last thing on earth you should do is get married." I didn't want that to be the last thing on earth I was going to do, so I presumed my library career was at an end. In two days she came to me and said, "Now, Miss Louise, you will stay on as long as you are able." Much to her surprise, I stayed on and on and on until her retirement. I even served her after her retirement to the point of sharpening her pencils which she would bring with her when she came to the library for books.

In 1939 we opened a new building on the main ground under the leadership of Mr. Harry Peterson, who is now Director of Public Libraries in Washington, D.C. Departments were organized, new policies set up, and such growth

witnessed staff reorganizations and a desire of Mr. Peterson to open bookmobile service in our city to augment the library service due to the lack of any branch service. His call to the military service disrupted many plans, and the effects of World War II altered tangible results. He was able to introduce the idea sufficiently that the late Mrs. Charles D. Reimers gave \$5,000 to purchase our first bookmobile. In 1947 Mr. Joe Gibberson succeeded Mr. Peterson as our librarian. He expressed a great interest in extension service from the libraries, and his enthusiasm was so great that in spite of lack of available materials and a shortage of trucks and cars, he purchased a large Mack truck chassis, a discarded school bus body. That was the beginning of assembling the first bookmobile for this part of Texas. After much planning of a book collection, organization of a department, and the make-believe bookmobile of shelves and a 150-foot extension cord to connect the charging machine to the schools at the locations we went, I was asked to take over the extension and children's departments combined. It must have been the brawn I had displayed, for surely it didn't exhibit the brain for such an undertaking. But I must confess it was challenging and different. We named our bookmobile Old Red for the paint was fire-engine red. Mrs. Chester Morrison had joined me to make up a staff of two to make or break the extension program of the Fort Worth Public Library. She was a resident of Handley. Mrs. Ella Mar Chabliss, long-time staff member, was to be in charge of the colored work of the bookmobile.

The first stop was to W. J. Turner School on the North Side. This was the day I can truthfully say I began to live for the library; to see the joy on the faces of children who had never seen a library, to hear the response to the reading of a dog or horse story, to get the human touch of people was far more gratifying than the physical handicaps. Incidentally, Mrs. Morrison and I had to have commercial drivers licenses. Many friends have wanted me to tell some of the high spots in our lives these last years. They are humorous to us, more possibly than the ones I will tell them to.

One of the interesting things that happened was from the freezing windshield incident where we were out on the North Side when suddenly a storm of sleet came down upon us and we were without any help to get back to the library. So stopping on 25th Street, trying to find some way to get a windshield wiper, we had no wiper but to keep the ice off the windshield, I went to a little grocery store. Of course, I thought everyone in Fort Worth knew about our bookmobile, but this little man did not know what I was talking about. But finally I convinced him that I needed something for a bookmobile windshield, so he cut three big onions half in two handed them to me, charged me a dime, and I went back to the bookmobile, climbed upon the radiator, braced myself with one arm, and started covering the windshield with all the onions, and I cried and it cried, and we got on down the road for so many miles, and then we'd start all over again. And so we came into the Fort Worth Public Library parking place without anything to say we didn't know how to handle in case of an ice storm.

Other things are interesting to us. One of the incidents that I'll always remember was that we went to the Brooklyn Heights Elementary School. It was at that time possibly 80% Black American, and they enjoyed the bookmobile so very much. Many of the schools did little favors for us when we went in, like bringing us a little drink or asking us to come in and hear their program or something, but this time the principal had called us that if we would come a little early that they had something for us. So we parked and soon all the children from Brooklyn Heights came out with the principal, and

they had a cake baked in orange and red with a little plastic band looking like a bookmobile on the top of it. And so they gave us this cake, and then the principal said, "We have a little girl who has written a poem about the bookmobile. It is in a frame that I think you will enjoy keeping the rest of your life." It wasn't an expensive frame, but it was the personal touch that made it hang in my office until I retired and it hangs in my home until today. The little poem went like this:

Tis a special Thursday morning; I'm leaning out the windowsill
A looking and a waiting to see the bookmobile
I can just see Mrs. Beckleman peeping through the door saying
"Time to check your book and get some more."
I see Mrs. Morrison waiting to check our books back in,
Books we may have seen in movies, such as Alcott's Little Men.
I can see it coming now, coming up the hill.
Oh, there's not a better sight than to see the bookmobile.

Now we may get a book and in two weeks bring it back,
And when Mrs. Morrison checks the card, she puts it in the rack.
After we're once inside the bookmobile door
We give her our books and go to get some more.
Then we go up one side and turn down the other;
We may even find a book for Father or for Mother.
Here's a shelf for boys and another one for girls.
We see books of famous people and Goldilocks with curls.

There are animal stories, detective and fiction, too.
Books where fairies come to life; there are many books for you.
Dear me, I just can't choose the book that's best for me.
Oh, here is Dapple Gray; there's not a better book I see.
Now our teacher's calling; it's time for us to go.
On my way out I see a book you ought to know.
It's called The Good Master, about a girl who was bad
Until her uncle taught her to be proud of the things she had.
I can see it leaving now, gliding down the hill
It will be two weeks more before we see the bookmobile.

These and many others were the first experiences of Old Red. In 1950 I yearned for the children of the county schools to enjoy and experience what had been done for the city. I was told that if I could economize enough, we might buy a small milk van and convert it into a small bookmobile. I patched up old books all summer, saving the salary of a deceased staff member by not replacing her for several months, and by scraping the barrel many times, we purchased a little Dodge milk van. We named it Greenie and painted it green to match the rural atmosphere, designing an ironing board to hang by a chain while driving and releasing it to use as a desk while checking books out. The doors were on slides; they were completely open or completely closed, but there was no choice until we invented a bolt and chain affair and hooked them at a certain angle. Again we were fortunate to secure a fine personality to supervise the county unit. Mrs. Mattie Johnson joined our staff and was later succeeded by Mrs. Reba Gooch, who was in charge of the county bookmobile until her recent death.

In 1954 our director, Mr. Arles Nixon, came to be our librarian. He was pleased but confused by the physical dexterity put forth by the weaker sex who drove Old Red and Little Greenie.

One of the first contributions he made to the extension department was the purchase of a real, manufactured, made-to-order bookmobile. A company in Worchester, Ohio, manufactured nothing but bookmobiles, so it was next to a heavenly dream to be told we could have the best bookmobile we could design for our needs. It was in memoriam of Mr. Dan Levy, our long-time board president. Within the next year another bookmobile was added to care for the increase in service of the library to the fast-growing area of our city. Little Greenie, the county bookmobile, had been replaced by two small custom-built bookmobiles.

In 1959 we made plans to hold a bond election, the purpose of which was to build a branch, and we were the only city in the United States according to our population without branch libraries. New people were coming in to our city and were disappointed that bookmobiles were the only medium of service beyond the main library. In the densely populated areas, books were being circulated at the rate of 315 books per hour on the bookmobiles and we were circulating over half the books borrowed from the library. We knew we had planted the seeds for a good branch program if the bond election carried. The survey made for the proposed branch library selections stemmed from two things: the usage of the bookmobile and the potential growth of the population in that area. The bond program was well planned, and Mr. Lloyd Turner, now past president of the school board and of the library board at that time, led a very informative and practical campaign for library needs. The 1961 bonds carried, and seven new locations for branch libraries were in the making.

Wherever a branch was built, we would take bookmobile service from that area, moving out into farther locations or lengthening schedules of some locations. For example, we had extended the time from a half day to a full day at the Wichita and Seminary Drive station. Western Hills was one that grew so fast that we would extend it in the fall. Our first branch was opened in 1962 in the southwest area covering Westcliff, Wedgewood and South Hills. The second branch was opened in the east side in April 1964. The City National Bank on East Lancaster gave the lot for the branch, making it possible for us to open sooner than planned. It was a generous gesture on the part of the directors of the bank, for which the people of this area are most grateful.

There were five branches yet to be located in the north, the west, the northeast, the southeast and the south side of the city, making library services available to all areas of our fast-growing city. Bookmobiles were to continue to move with the advancing progress of the library. Our county library contract expired in 1963, and a new one resulted in a cutback in service to half the bookmobile operations prior to January 1, 1964. The library, along with other public services in the county, are the concern of the fringe municipalities, and the rural population today has decreased to 3% of the population of the county. There are 34 townships and some are still in need of bookmobile service. But, my prayer is that children, wherever they are, will be allowed the privilege of good reading. In September 1964 Mr. Nixon, the director for ten years, accepted a position as Assistant Director to the Phoenix Public Library in Phoenix, Arizona.

104778

On October 1 of that year the Fort Worth Public Library Board of Trustees appointed Mr. Weiman Jones as our new director. He is exceptionally well trained for the job, very progressive, and the first year of Mr. Jones' program the plans for the five remaining branches were on the architects' drawing board and had been approved by the City Council. History was made in the year of 1966 when we saw the construction of five branches nearing completion. In June 1967 the five branches were opened: the west branch on Bernie Anderson and Waverly Way; the north branch on Circle Park and Park Avenue; the northeast branch on East Berry and Pate, and the south branch on Bolt and Jones and the northwest branch on Chandler and Yucca. At the opening of a branch there is a dedication program and our services were now available to the north, east, south and west sections of our city. Today we serve 51 stops on the six bookmobiles in the city and county by a staff with 14 workers. Some are young men working their way through college or the seminary, driving bookmobiles or assisting the librarian. They experience the same humorous incidents I had when I was having fun working on the bookmobile. I try to go as often as I can on the stops even though my time is consumed in schedules, book selections, meetings with civic groups, PTA's and friends like you who have been kind enough to listen to me. Next to my church the greatest joy of my life is the bookmobile service of the Fort Worth Public Library. In 1969 on January 3 I retired from my work at the library to begin a new life, a life of leisure. I have many happy memories to recall when I leave it and it is with the best of good wishes I bequeath my responsibilities to the younger generation with their innovations of the jet age.

Mrs. Frances Stacey, a native of Mississippi, a graduate of Mississippi State College for Women with a masters degree in library science from NTSU in Denton, succeeded me. In August of 1970 Mr. Weiman Jones resigned to accept the directorship of Los Angeles County Libraries and Mrs. Mabel Fisher, our competent and able assistant, succeeded him.

I would like to give the name of the little girl at Brooklyn Heights Elementary School who wrote the poem that was given above on the Bookmobile. Her name was Jeanie Hightnight, and she was in grade six of Brooklyn Heights Elementary. And then another one who made a great contribution in county rural bookmobiles was Mrs. Morris Barton. She too came from the Handley area, and Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Barton and Mrs. Gooch were the three people who served in my tenure of the county bookmobile.

Interviewer: What was your name, Mrs. Beckleman?

Mrs. Beckleman: My maiden name was Frances Louise Sidebottom. I was born in Johnson Station community, three miles south of Arlington, on September 18, 1908.

My father's name was James Louis Sidebottom, and my mother's name was Sarah Harrison. They were born in Kentucky and came to Texas in late 1890.

Interviewer: When did you come to Fort Worth?

Mrs. Beckleman: I lived one year in Fort Worth in 1933; then we moved to Glen Rose and Granbury, Texas. I came back and started to school at E. M. Daggett Elementary in the seventh grade. From there we went to the old Junior High which is Jennings Avenue today, and from there to the Central High School, which is now Paschal.

Mrs. Bessie Litzse who was an outstanding English teacher in my life. Mrs. Helena Yantis was my favorite math teacher, and Miss Lena Gardner was my English teacher who led me into the library field by asking the librarian at old Central High School to let me work in the library there at the school or during different parts of my day's work, and this Miss Stevens--Clara Stevens--recommended me to Mrs. Shuford as an apprentice.

Interviewer: How did you get to school?

Mrs. Beckleman: Walked.

Interviewer: About how far?

Mrs. Beckleman: Oh, it wasn't too far; I guess about 15 to 20 blocks.

Interviewer: And when you were married?

Mrs. Beckleman: I married July 26, 1927 in Fort Worth. I have two sons, Dan Edward and Timothy Carl.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little about them?

Mrs. Beckleman: Dan is a graduate of University of Texas and the director and head coach in the Castleberry school system; he took his major in math and science and teaches math. He's active in the River Oaks Baptist Church. He married Irene Snyder of San Antonio, Texas, whom he met at the University, and they have two children, Dana Ann, 13, a student of Irma Marsh Jr. High, and Lee Edward, 10, a student of Castleberry Elementary. They are all interested in life: sport life, cultural life, and live very active, happy lives. Tim is with the Federal Aviation Agency as a radar controller. He married Cara Burn of Arlington, Texas. He did not finish college. He is an active member of Shady Oaks Baptist Church, lives in North Richland Hills, and has two daughters: Tracey, who is 12 and entering into North Richland Jr. High, and Alicia, who is 10, goes to Holiday Heights Elementary.

Since we had two boys, we thought it would be nice to give them some outdoor rural life, so we explored all the areas outlying Fort Worth and it took us a couple or three years to find something that was in the Fort Worth School District. It had rural element, so in 1946 we bought 22 acres on Sandy Lane and moved our children there when they were 18 months old and one was six.