

Peele, Myrtle: Book Dreams ^[1]

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Myrtle Peele: book dreams

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 11/14/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Myrtle Peele remembers when books were rare and precious things. A bookmobile librarian for 40 years, she was part of a heroic generation of women who first brought books to the general public. They founded our public libraries, labored as librarians and drove bookmobiles into the state's most remote corners. Peele worked 60-hour weeks and braved dirt roads in rain, snow and even a hurricane. Married at age 15, she crusaded for books while raising children and working long hours on the family farm. She talked with me at her home near Williamston, two hours east of Raleigh. "I just always loved books," she told me. "I loved to read, and I wanted everybody to have access to books."

This column is dedicated to the [North Carolina Library Association](#) ^[3] on the occasion of its 100th anniversary.



Myrtle Peele. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for Myrtle Peele to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born right here in Martin County 90 years ago in the Farm Life community. My daddy was a farmer. Papa never went to school, but he was one of these people who wanted to learn everything and Mama taught him to read. Every time I went to school, he'd be there. The only thing most people bought to read in those days was the Sunday newspaper, and the only books they had at home were a Bible and the dictionary. There were no libraries. And back then, you just didn't have any money for foolish things. I started working with the bookmobile in 1940. I remember one place we stopped, the man said, "Naw, we don't do much reading around here." (She laughs.) There were places like that, but then other people just acted like they appreciated it. Everywhere I went, there was a crowd coming up to me. All the girl children, mostly, loved to read, and the mothers and grandmothers, and the little boys. Now everybody reads, but then it was exciting. They were just so eager. You'd be surprised how many people wanted books. We worked from 7:30 in the morning until 6 and 7 and 8 at night and it was nothing for us to check out 1,500 books on our run. A lot of people back then didn't have but a third- or fourth-grade education. A lot of them were sharecroppers. Reading opened up a whole new thing for them, some of them, that they didn't know or didn't even realize was there. They had a desire. But with the bookmobile, they could have something to look forward to. They could sit down a minute at night before they went to bed and read. It was something to give you an energy to think about what you'd like to be and do. It gave them



Beaufort Hyde Martin Regional Library Association bookmobile with librarians and patrons. (February, 1942. Photo courtesy of the State Library of North Carolina. [Bookmobile photo did not appear in the original News & Observer column.] I think our first bookmobile was an old Ford. It wasn't real large. It had glass doors that you opened on the outside, and there were shelves on each side. You couldn't do anything inside. The people had to stay on the outside and look at the books. We went on all the backwoods roads. On those clay roads down in Jamesville, the clay on the tire tracks would be that deep. The bookmobile would get stuck, clay up to your fenders. I'd get out and grab pine limbs and brush and cram them under the tires. We didn't let the weather stop us. We've been out in the snow and when it was hot in the summer. We were out in one of the hurricanes. That was one of the craziest things we did, but everybody was home. They said, "Well, we needed to read. The children always told me that, when it's bad like that and they have to stay in the house, that's when they could read all they want to. So we went. Some places we stopped at a crossroads or a churchyard, but mostly at a store, like a country store. We had some good community stops, too, where we would stop at a house and six or seven houses would meet us there. People came will. We had one elderly lady who had to walk a good mile. She put a big bag on her shoulder and put those books in it. We had a lot of people from the pulp mill at Plymouth. We had one man there, he read, his wife read, the children read. They got a box of books every time. She was not a housekeeper. Instead of cleaning her house up, she read books. She read most of the people were not just readers. They were friends. Like Mr. John Swinson down at Jamesville. He was one of my favorite people. He liked Hemingway. He liked science, history. He had infantile paralysis when he was a child, and he was lame. But Mr. Swinson had a goose, and he taught that goose to carry his books. He put a strap around it and put the books on the goose's back. The goose went to school with him every day. That goose stayed at school all day, and then the goose came home. That was the thing with me. You always met people that you would never forget. Every day was different, and every day there was something that you could laugh about. I think it did me as much good as it did the people I carried books. I still have nights when I dream that I'm on the bookmobile. Except for my children, it was about the most important thing in my life.

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :

Myrtle Peele lived from March 4, 1914 - January 9, 2011.

U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014. Ancestry Library Edition. Accessed 3/2/2016.

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