

1968: Books by Mail

In 1968, CLR funded the [San Antonio Public Library System](#) \$22,500 to explore the feasibility of books by mail as a regular feature of public library service in San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas. While the concept of library lending to users by mail was not new, the practice had become all but unknown in the twentieth century.

Direct lending by mail would allow libraries to extend their services beyond traditional interlibrary loan and bookmobiles. In the experiment, the would-be borrower called the library with their request. Assuming their account was in good standing, the book would be mailed within 24 hours. The borrower paid only return postage.

The experiment was popular with patrons, and by 1970, San Antonio Public had permanently installed books-by-mail as a service to the user. Additional findings of the study included that:

- Book loans by mail amounted to 17% of total loans
- Phone service was at least as quick (for the librarian) as walk-in service
- The working area required was less than 90 feet
- The service was a public relations boost
- On-time return by mail was better than with walk-in patrons

The following description is taken from the 12th annual report of the Council on Library Resources, Inc., for the period ending June 30, 1968, pp. 24–25.

Home Delivery of Books Home delivery of books dates back to at least the nineteenth century but, except for shut-ins and members of a few subscription libraries, such service has faded away in the present century. However, there has been recent renewal of interest in the idea, and in 1961 the Council made a grant for a trial.⁴² Because of extraneous factors the results were inconclusive, but the idea persisted and was the subject of a four-day meeting during the American Library Association's annual conference in June 1967. The interest shown there prompted the Council to make a grant to the San Antonio Public Library System to explore the feasibility of books by mail as a regular feature of public library service in San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas.

During the experiment, anyone who does not owe fines on overdue books can expect books to be mailed to him at his home within 24 hours of his telephoned request. San Antonio Public absorbs the cost of postage and other incidental expenses on outgoing packages. Return of the books is the responsibility of the borrower. Costs are to be compared with those of conventional walk-in service to ascertain whether free mailing can realistically become a part of the services offered by the San Antonio Public Library System.

⁴² VI: 32; XI: 29-30.