

*And The Ladies of the Club...:
A Sociohistory of the
Chambers County Book Trailers
1937- 1957*

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In the mid-1930s, Texas boasted a population of 6,117,000,¹ with nearly half its citizens living in rural counties, like Chambers County located along the upper Gulf Coast in the southeastern section of the state.² Basically an agricultural area, Chambers County farmers produced 400,000 bushels of rice and corn per year while ranchers contributed \$1,350,000 annually to the economy. Anahuac, located midway between Houston and Beaumont, was the largest town with 700

residents and served as the county seat.³ Women between the ages of eighteen and fifty, the majority who were married homemakers, totaled about a quarter of the population. By 1937, apparently the population density had reached a critical point with many women living closely together to think about cultural improvements to their life-styles. From this discussion, the groundwork was laid for a literary club; thus, in September, 1937, ten women from Chambers County formed the Book Trailers Club where women sought literary en-

lightenment as well as social contact with others like themselves. Their subsequent activities, however, both individually and as a group, resulted in significant contributions to the life of their community.

Women's clubs in America have a history that reaches back to the mid 1800s. A familiar type of women's club had a literary or cultural agenda. Jennie Croley, writing in 1898, suggested that literary clubs reflected the "desire among women engaged mainly in domestic duties for the exercise of mental faculty, and the education of a more intimate knowledge of vital questions and issues."⁴ In other words, they were established to build self-confidence and to sharpen public skills through art and literature. This literary club phenomenon took hold throughout America and spread even into rural areas such as Texas's Chambers County by the late 1930s. Karen J. Blair of Ohio State University states that a strong sense of sisterhood grew among these women.⁵ They came together to reach toward cultural enlightenment and social attainment as well as to enjoy the sisterhood among women as they began to realize that they were much stronger as a group than they were as individuals.

In retrospect it seems strange that these women of Chambers County would organize their literary club in the 1930s.

The country was, after all, still in the midst of the Depression. However, as Susan Ware points out, "Women's lives were probably less disrupted by the Depression than men's."⁶ Women had primary responsibilities for the home and family. In white, middle class homes like those of the Book Trailer's founders the women's role was to be, as Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "the inspiration of the homes, the persons for whom the men really work."⁷

Ware also suggests that by 1937, the Depression "no longer dominated the national mood."⁸ Certainly, no sense of crisis can be discerned from the founders of the Book Trailers. Their beginnings were completely traditional. Ware asserts, "In general, American society made few attempts to challenge the existing definitions of male and female roles during the 1930s."⁹ The women founding the Book Trailers made this commitment to traditional roles clear from their statement of purpose, their flower and color choices, their meeting format, their book choices, even their names.

Members of the Book Trailers club held very traditional views centered around family needs and their views of a feminine role. The Book Trailers provided "an opportunity for the wives and widows of the area's cattlemen and agriculturists from several connecting counties to meet

literary clubs reflected the "desire among women engaged mainly in domestic duties for the exercise of mental faculty, and the education of a more intimate knowledge of vital questions and issues."



And the ladies of the Club. . . . On April 19, 1958 the Book Trailers observed their 20th anniversary at the Magnolia Ridge Country Club in Liberty, Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEVIN LADD, WALLISVILLE HERITAGE PARK

together as a means of gathering and discussing favorite books."¹⁰ These conservative views were also reflected in the selection of symbols used by the club. The flower selected was the rose. Throughout history, the rose has been a symbol of completion, of consummate achievement and perfection, truly traditional values for women.¹¹ The colors were pink and white. Pink is, of course, the color that represents femininity and symbolizes sensuality and the emotions while white symbolizes traditional feminine purity.¹² Because members regarded their families so highly, the calendar of the club's activities coincided with the public school cal-

endar. The club regularly met one Thursday each month, October through May, with summers reserved for family vacations and children. With this schedule, the Book Trailers mirrored literary and culture clubs all over America which paced their club's activities around the schedule required at home. Blair notes that clubwomen across the nation routinely spent their summers supervising children or visiting in a vacation spot.¹³

Official club materials gave the members little personal identity. They are listed as Mrs. J.T. White, IV or Mrs. Joe Gregg. In spite of these traditional restrictions, however, individual lives and talents can

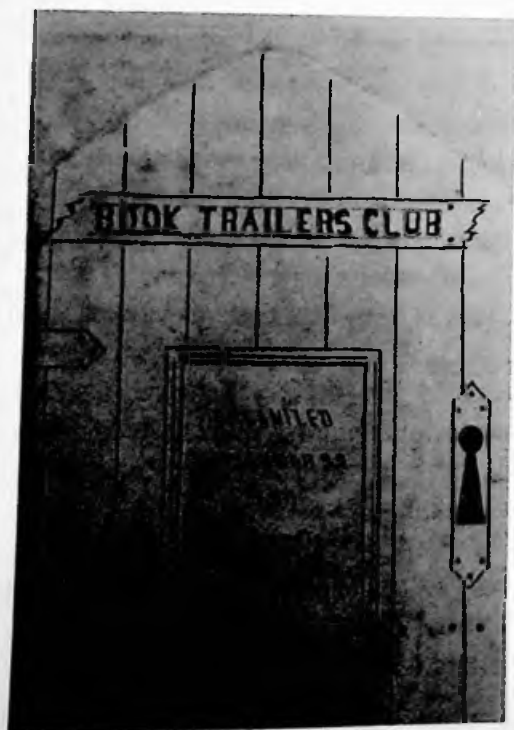
be glimpsed through the notes of the club over the years. Births, for instance, are coyly noted: "Bob Jr. took up his permanent residence with the Halls" or "Mrs. C.B. Jeffery of Devers put out a TEENIE WEENIE new edition"¹⁴). Also the program notes special events that took place in the lives of the members such as Mrs. E. V. (Pat) Boyt's highlights of her and her husband's plane trip to Guatemala where they were guests of the American Ambassador. In 1951 members celebrated fellow Book Trailer Darlene Bridges' starring role in a Hollywood movie.¹⁵

The format of a Book Trailers meeting was planned with reviewers and hostesses selected one year in advance. The women gathered at a member's home for business sessions that included a book review and luncheon. Special holidays were celebrated with featured socials. The

books chosen varied each year. In 1937, for example, all male authors were selected, while 1938 featured all women. Most of the books in all years were popular rather than classic choices. The most consistent factor in the selection of books was that they were mostly popular literature of the time, and many are not familiar today. These women of this small rural community were part of the American clubwoman tradition.

Individual talents began to shine early within the Book Trailers, adding to the cultural avenues that were open to the women of the club. Mrs. Roy S. (Eythle) White, one of the founders, used her gift of art to capture the life of Chambers County on canvas and eventually through her pen as well. The rise in her artistic pursuits seemed closely related to the rise of the Book Trailers, since she began painting at the same time that the club began. Mrs. White strove to share her art and resources with the community. She held art sessions in her home, supplying all the materials and occasionally a professional artist. Due to the distance required to purchase art supplies during this time, Mrs. White became the art source for the Anahuac/Chambers County area.

With members like Mrs. White leading through the use of her individual talent, the Book Trailers as a group supported cultural improvement. For example, the club's members participated in plays.



The cover of the Book Trailers Club scrapbook the year the club was organized.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEVIN LADD,
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They invited regional literary critics to review selected pieces. The club co-sponsored a style show in February 1954 with the Junior League of Houston. As a special cultural attraction to the meetings, members shared their slides of trips abroad, such as Hawaii and Central America. Just like clubwomen all over America, the frequent absence of husbands and the presence of other women who were active in the same type of traditional roles made the study of culture attractive to them.¹⁶

Traditional social interests, however, remained paramount. The women of the Book Trailers held the social rituals they observed in high regard. Each month the hostess carried a thematic statement through the meeting. All of the best place settings and etiquette were in place. A Book Trailer member in 1945 states, "We had to look our best for these Book Trailer club meetings!"¹⁷ The end of the year socials would be day-long events enjoyed by members and invited guests. These events convened at members' beach houses or at the Port Boliver Lighthouse or at regional hotels or area country clubs.

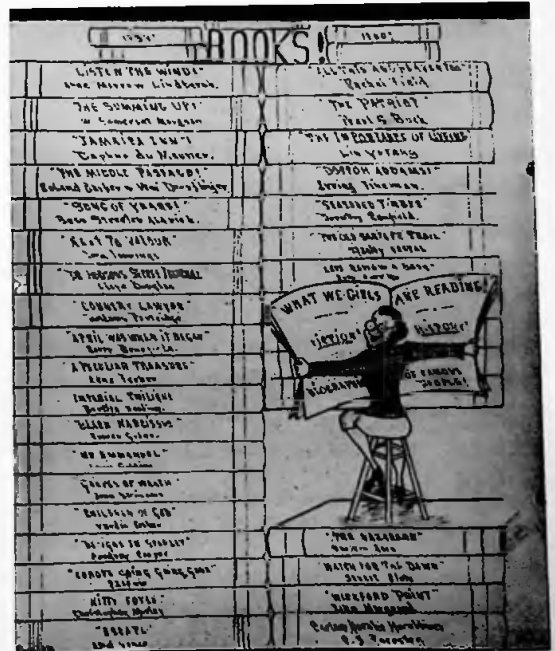
Community interests were also on the agenda of the Book Trailers' members. Mrs. Guy C. (Katherine) Jackson Jr., charter member of the Book Trailers and wife of a county judge, became the leader of a nationwide drive in 1938 aimed toward the struggle against taxes that in-

creased the cost of living, the National Consumer Tax Commission. Mrs. Jackson provided information to the housewives of Anahuac to influence them to become active regarding issues that would directly affect their lives. Customary gender expectations were changing for women like Mrs. Jackson. Her leadership in many public service activities was evident in her social resume: a delegate at the state PTA convention in 1937, head of the PTA council in 1938, president of the PTA in 1939, school board member, head of the local chapter of the American Red Cross 1940-41, and Fine Arts club president in 1951.

One of the things that women throughout the country learned in the culture clubs was the ability to express themselves in public.¹⁸ The Book Trailers were no different. No one at the time, for example, knew at the first meeting of the

A list of the works reviewed by the Book Trailers as revealed in their 1939-1940 scrapbook. What happened to Gonc With The Wind?

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Book Trailers in October 1937, that Mrs. J.T. White IV was "scared literally to death."¹⁹ Their confidence, however, grew rapidly as the *Anahuac Progress* reported their movement from club reviews to public appearances. The excitement and accomplishments of the Book Trailers' members spread throughout the adjacent counties, and whenever news of the Book Trailers got out, they were invited to give their reviews to other groups. Just one year after the founding of the Book Trailers, Mrs. Fred Sterret was invited to Anahuac High School to share her review of Anne Nidholas' *Abie's Irish Rose*. According to the newspaper, the review was well received, and many invitations resulted. In January 1939, Mrs. Sterret's review was requested at the meeting of the Business and Professional Women of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Beaumont, a much larger East Texas town. In 1939, reviews of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* by Mrs. George Bridges was requested by the Beaumont Chapter of Order of the Eastern Star and by the Prairie View Garden Club. In 1946 the members of the club were invited to hear reviews given at the Dayton Women's Club. The Book Trailers were looked to as a role model. The interests of the members and the position they held in the literary club circle allowed them the opportunity to travel to Beaumont for the Texas Women's Press Conference in 1947 and to the Southwest Writers Conference held in Corpus Christi in 1948.

Just as the women of the Book Trailers were beginning to accept the challenges of their more public roles, the country and the state was moving rapidly

from the economic focus of the Depression years to the world stage of the war years. Susan Hartmann notes that during the war years (1941-45) "the media continuously made women aware of their importance not alone as mothers, wives and homemakers, but also as workers, citizens and even as soldiers."²⁰ Certainly, the women of Chambers County were aware of these new appeals. They must have known, for example, that Oveta Culp Hobby from neighboring Harris County had been put in charge of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC, later the Women's Army Corps, or WACs) in 1942. As Mrs. Hobby herself noted in a 1980 interview, "I think women working during the war had a tremendous influence on women moving into the labor force. . . ."²¹

The Book Trailers, however, showed little interest in these expanded roles for women. Their book choices for the war years offer little evidence of the huge national effort. Humor like *What Makes Sammy Run*, *The Egg and I*, and *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay* competed with historical novels like *Keys to the Kingdom* and *Dragonwyck* and biography like *The Doctors Mayo* and *Anna and the King of Siam*. Only twice in the years between 1941 and 1945 was the war mentioned: *Mr. Winkle Goes to War* and Bob Hope's *I Never Left Home*, both humorous treatments of the serious subject. Similarly, the club notes seldom mention absent husbands or sons or any problems caused by war shortages. The Summer-Get-Together party was held as usual at the Boyt's beach house; Mrs. Engledow adopted Rebecca; and the scrapbook reserved special pages for the

"Glamour Girl" photo exhibit.²²

At the same time that the Book Trailers' very traditional nature was being upheld, however, the members were also reaching out to the community. In November 1941, the members of the Book Trailers offered their assistance with the annual Christmas Seal Drive against tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was still a devastating disease and the principal cause of death among young people. With the war effort in full force in 1942, the Book Trailers saw another opportunity to reach out not only to their community but beyond, to the military of the United States. As young men were recruited and awaited overseas duty, the American Red Cross provided canteens and entertainment for the recruits. As the war escalated, the Book Trailers' involvement included the collection of supplies to be sent to the servicemen through the Red Cross. The Book Trailers also assisted the effort by rolling bandages, a necessity during war time.

The club's postwar years seem, in many ways, to mark a retreat away from the public sphere. The books chosen for these years show no indication that the women of Chambers County were involved in world events. The books they choose still showed the same mix of humor, historical novels and light biography with an occasional classic like Moliere's *The Misanthrope*, identified as "a play by the French playwright,"²³ thrown into the mix. Some changes, however, occurred. The club grew. For several of the social events, for example, "covers were laid" for fifty to sixty guests. Most of the meetings were held outside the members'

homes, presumably because luncheons for fifty could not be accommodated in most homes. The club members were traveling, one to Central America, another to Hawaii, a third across the South. The entire group traveled the 35 miles to Houston once a year to lunch at the Junior League Tea-room.

These changes, however, did not affect the basic traditional nature of the club and its members. The social notes still focused on births, marriages and health reports. The flower arrangements got as much space as the book reviews. The parties, as always, were frequent and well-covered in the annual scrapbook.

In their traditional concerns, the Book Trailers' members mirrored the country as a whole. Rochelle Gatlin notes that even fashion after the war became ultra-feminine: "Teenage girls in the 1950s wore half a dozen crinolines under full skirts, pulled in their waists with wide 'cinch' belts and pushed out their breasts with padded 'uplift' bras."²⁴ Gatlin also comments that books like *The Egg and I* and *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, both books reviewed by the Book Trailers during the period, "trivialized women and encouraged them to accept guilt and inadequacy as part of their fate."²⁵

Eugina Kaledin makes the point that although the 1950s was a time of conformity to traditional feminine roles and even a return to more limited roles, it "must also be regarded as a period of personal growth if not as a time of social and political gain."²⁶ One such example among the Book Trailers was Darlene Bridges. The importance of confidence in public speaking led Mrs. Bridges to expand public

speaking courses in the public schools. Mrs. Bridges held the office of president of the Book Trailers in 1940. She was also an instructor of correct speech and dramatics at Anahuac High School. Due to her diligent efforts, an expressions class was added to the curriculum. This class provided the opportunity for students to explain works of literature and project dramatic expression, just as Mrs. Bridges had learned in the Book Trailers. The expressions class was successful, according to the *Anahuac Progress*, and allowed many students the opportunity to perform in dramatic works for the community. Mrs. Bridges' work went even farther outside the community. In 1948, Mrs. Bridges played the role of Mary, mother of Jesus, in the filming of *The Lawton Story*. The film was based on the passion play that had been performed for many years and led to the production of *Prince of Peace* in 1951. Another member, Mrs. R.D.

the club's motto adopted at its founding in 1937: "Our role in life may not be what we desire, but let us play our part with a sincerity of purpose and speak our lines clearly."

Evans exercised community leadership of another sort. She served as one of two State Democratic Party committee-women. A third, Mrs. Roy White, still an active artist, was achieving wide public recognition. In the 1950s, Mrs. White developed a series of paintings as a tribute to the Ace industry that had developed in Texas during the previous ten years. This type of folkart was experiencing a growing number of admirers as home became the focal point for American families.²⁷ Visual art was not Mrs. White's only gift to her community. She also published *Arabella of Trinity Bay* in 1955, a collection of poetry that reflects her admiration for the area. Mrs. White's lifelong passion of the arts was not unrecognized. Her many achievements include membership in the National League of American Pen Women, *Who's Who in American Art*, and *Who's Who in American Women*. Even 60 years after the founding of the Book Trailers, Mrs. White still paints and maintains



These books were donated by the Book Trailers to the Chambers County Library in 1944 and 1945.

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a extensive gallery at her home in Anahuac.

In the first twenty years of its history, the Book Trailers seemed to mirror the nation's views of women's roles. By and large they were not involved in the public issues of these twenty years. Most of them stayed home with their families just as their counterparts did across the country. They were conservative, apparently content with the role assigned them by society. The Book Trailers, however, provided just enough individual women varying those conservative roles to match the changes in the country as a whole. That those individual leaders and changes within the community were not entirely coincidental can be inferred from the club's motto adopted at its founding in 1937: "Our role in life may not be what we desire, but let us play our part with a sincerity of purpose and speak our lines clearly."²⁸

Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in an essay for the Texas State Historical Association suggests that women's history has two parts. The first is recovering the historical record of women's activities. The second is using these records to draw careful generalizations that illuminate women's actual lives in past times. This study of the Book Trailers in Chambers County has had both of these goals. By studying the records left of the club's first twenty years, it helps draw the historical portrait more clearly. Second, this portrait clearly shows that Chambers County women were part of the traditional mainstream. Often, history chronicles genius and monster, the exceptions to the rule. These women were the rule: their roles

changed little in the twenty years between 1937 and 1957. Were they entirely satisfied with this status quo? Their motto may indicate that they were not completely content. If so, they again mirrored the nation. After all, it was women exactly like the members of the Book Trailers that Betty Friedan interviewed in 1958. Those interviews in turn led to her book *The Feminine Mystique*, which in 1963 sounded the opening trumpet for the second surge of feminism, which no doubt, future historians will discover touched Chambers County as much as it touched the rest of the nation in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

End Notes

1. "Population By County," *Texas Almanac Guide Supplement*, no. 1937 Edition (1937). 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. "Cities and Counties." *Texas Almanac*. 1940 ed. 397.
4. Sheila M. Rothman, *Women's Proper Place* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978). 65.
5. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*, first ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980).59.
6. Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930's* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982). 14.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 197.

9. *Ibid.*, 199.
 10. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d.
 11. J.E. Cirlot, ed., *Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1971). 275.
 12. *Ibid.*, 54.
 13. Blair. 63.
 14. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d. 8, 13.
 15. *Ibid.*, 16, 17.
 16. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914*, first ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980). 61.
 17. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d. 13.
 18. Blair. 67.
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 21. Beverly Bentley and Patricia Lasher, *Texas Women: Interviews & Images*, First ed. (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers Inc., 1980). 76.
 22. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d. 10-13.
 23. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d. 43.
 24. Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women Since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987). 7.
 25. *Ibid.*, 14.
 26. Eugenia Kaledin, *American Women in the 1950's: Mothers and More* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984). 211.
 27. Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1995).
 28. *Chambers County Book Trailers*. Wallisville, TX:, n.d. 2.
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