

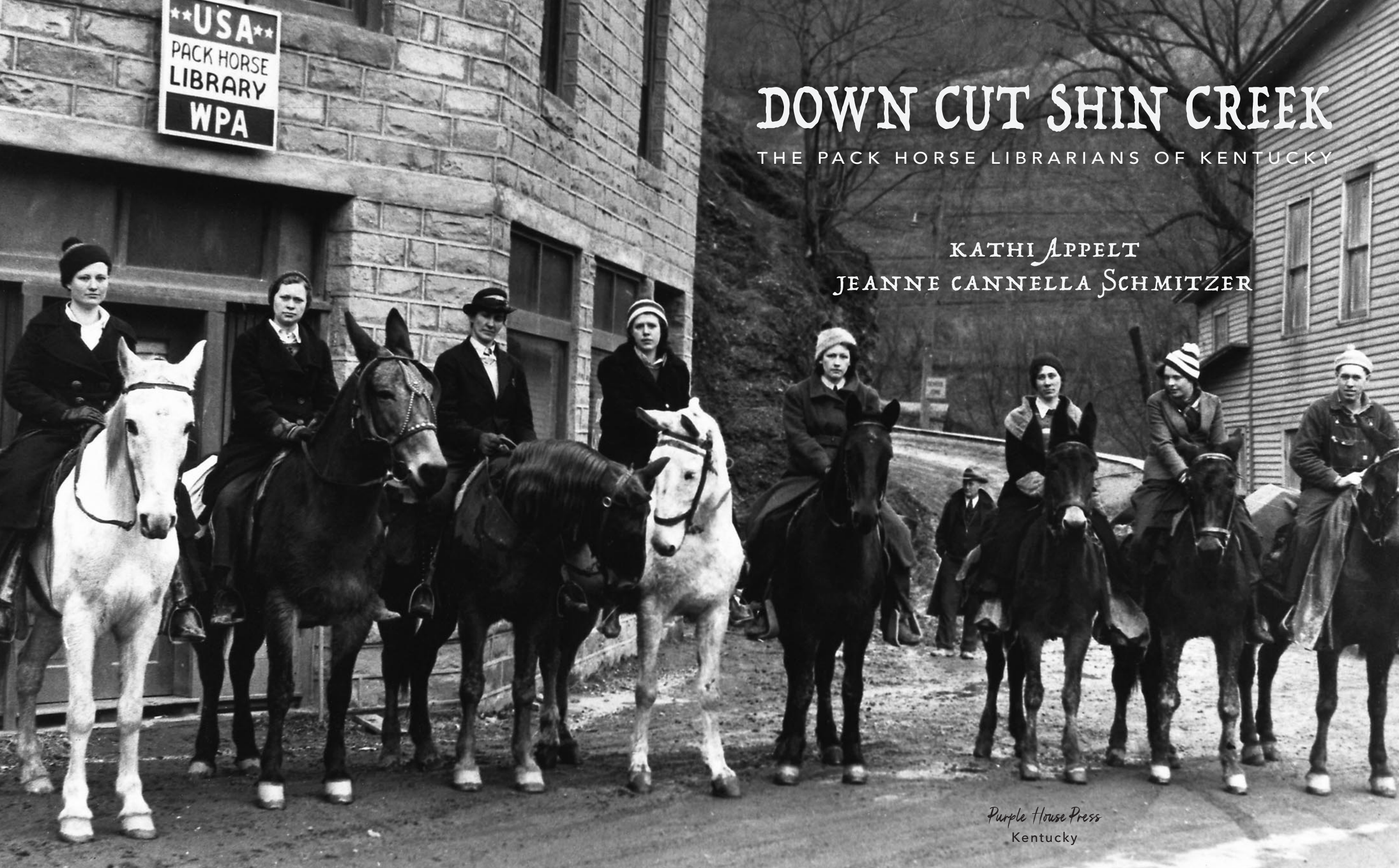
★ ★ USA ★ ★
PACK HORSE
LIBRARY
WPA

DOWN CUT SHIN CREEK

THE PACK HORSE LIBRARIANS OF KENTUCKY

KATHI APPELT

JEANNE CANNELLA SCHMITZER



Purple House Press
Kentucky

To Clara Monce—librarian, horsewoman, friend—with love

K.A.

To Grace

J.C.S.

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The path this project took us along was often just as torturous as those steep byways taken by the pack horse librarians. We could never have reached our journey's end without the help of numerous people.

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Marilyn Marlow of Curtis Brown kept the lanterns lit as we stumbled along.

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Thank you kindly, one and all!

—K.A. and J.C.S.



Grace Caudill Lucas, former pack horse librarian, fall 1999.

PUTTING WOMEN TO WORK

“Son, the times they was so hard, you couldn’t hardly crack them.”

GRACE CAUDILL LUCAS

They were the darkest of times, the years following the crash of the stock market in 1929. Thousands of people across the United States were cast out of their jobs, off their farms, out of their homes and apartments, and into the crushing depths of poverty. Fathers, forced out of work, abandoned their families rather than watch them suffer; mothers died of malnutrition; children went without shoes or shelter or schooling. An entire nation, it seemed, was standing in one long breadline, desperate for even the barest essentials. It was a crisis of monumental proportions. It was known as the Great Depression.

Already one of the poorest states in the country, Kentucky was particularly hard hit, especially the rocky and mountainous eastern half of the state. Coal was Kentucky’s main resource. With so many factories shut down nationwide, and the use of natural gas for heating on the increase, the need for coal diminished and hundreds of mines were closed. Thousands of coal workers were laid off. Though tough and resilient by nature, many Kentuckians barely hung on.

To add to the despair, the Ohio River, which borders Kentucky, flooded in 1930, killing more than a hundred people and washing



This Kentucky girl's clothing shows the extreme poverty that many mountain people experienced during the 1930s.

away the already thin layer of topsoil that covered the hardscrabble landscape, making farming virtually impossible.

In 1933, Federal Emergency Relief Director Harry Hopkins sent Lorena Hickock, a former reporter for the *Minneapolis Tribune*, to

report on the conditions in the area. She wrote back: “[Residents] live in abandoned mining camps. The rest live in little communities, rather like Indian villages—and without any kind of sanitation whatever—back up at the headwaters of creeks, in the mountains.... [F]ive babies up at one of those creeks died of starvation in the last ten days.... [M]et an old woman half-dead from pellagra [a skin disease cause by malnutrition], stumbling along on bare, gnarled old feet, begging for food.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had to find a way to help the American people. In 1933, he created a relief program known as the New Deal. Two years later, he expanded the New Deal by adding the Works Progress Administration, which in 1939 was renamed the Work *Projects* Administration. The goals of the WPA were twofold: to put people to work and to promote social and cultural awareness with art, theater, and literature.

Many of the original New Deal programs required heavy physical labor. WPA workers built hundreds of schools, health clinics, roads, park facilities, and community centers. Much of what we now call our “infrastructure”—highways, schools, power plants, etc.—is here thanks to thousands of WPA workers. Most of those projects were considered “men’s work,” and even though today it is not unusual for women to work in these jobs, in the 1930s it was considered unseemly.

By 1935, however, with so many women heading households and ending up on the relief rolls, it was clear that employment for them was essential. Thus a concerted effort was made to create jobs to put women to work and take them off the dole. The new jobs included work in



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was a great advocate of WPA programs that put women to work. In 1937, she visited West Liberty, Kentucky, where she met with one of the pack horse librarians.

health services, school lunch programs, sewing projects, and libraries.

It was during the time of the WPA that many areas of the country, particularly poor rural areas, received free public library service for the very first time. Without a system of roads, reaching many of these areas required ingenuity. For example, in the backwaters of Mississippi and Louisiana, librarians delivered books on small flatboats that they navigated with poles through the marshy bayous.



The WPA sponsored other traveling libraries. In the marshes of Louisiana, books were delivered by flatboat.

But it was eastern Kentucky's Pack Horse Library Project that proved to be the most innovative of all.



AN ORDINARY DAY

(THE WAY IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN)

It's early, four thirty A.M., and the air in the dark barn is cold and crisp. In the dim light of the coal-oil lamp, the book woman can see gray puffs of steam float from her horse's nostrils. She shivers. At the age of twenty-two, and having grown up in these hills, she knows how bitterly cold a January day here can get.

As she brushes the gelding's black coat, she wishes she could stay home, close to her two young children still asleep in the tiny wood-frame house nestled on the side of the hill. Her mother will keep an eye on them for her, but she will miss her babes and worry about them nonetheless.

She checks her saddlebags. They're filled with tattered books and magazines, a few bulletins from the WPA, some reference materials, and a couple of homemade scrapbooks, one she made herself and one sent by a Girl Scout troop all the way from Cincinnati. She pats the horse's neck, then leads him to the gate, where she tightens the girth on the saddle and pulls herself onto his back.

These librarians begin their day at dawn along Cut Shin Creek.