

Talking Book Voices Podcast
Season 3, Episode 8
The History of TBP

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Podcast Transcript
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Summary: In this episode, Engagement Specialist Alicia and Program Engagement Manager Jaclyn take listeners all the way back to 1809 to trace the complete history of the Talking Book Program—from Louis Braille's birth and the founding of the National Library Service, through Texas joining the national network in 1931, to the digital audiobook players patrons use today. Learn how a \$1,000 appropriation for raised-letter books grew into a free, statewide library service for Texans with visual, physical, and reading disabilities.

NARRATOR INTRO: Welcome to Talking Book Voices, the podcast. Get ready to embark on an adventure with us as we dive into and celebrate the magic of the Texas Talking Book Program. Let's raise our voices together and make the world of literature accessible for all. The Texas Talking Book Program is a division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission and serves as a regional library for the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, a division of the Library of Congress. The Talking Book Program provides specialized library services to individuals who have a qualifying visual, physical, or reading disability, such as dyslexia.

In each episode of Talking Book Voices, we will delve into the heart of the program, uncovering its history, sharing inspiring stories, and exploring the vast collection of materials it has to offer. We will bring you the latest updates, interviews with program experts and patrons, and useful tips to make the most of this invaluable program for Texans and beyond.

So, whether you're an avid reader, someone with a print disability seeking accessible materials, or just curious to learn more about this great program, this podcast is made for you! Don't forget to visit us at www.texastalkingbooks.org for more information. So, let's begin Texas Talking Book Voices, a podcast by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

ALICIA: Hello TBP Voices listeners! I'm Alicia, a TBP Engagement Specialist, and I am so excited that you're joining us on this episode of TBP Voices, where we're going to be doing something a little different—we're telling the entire history of the Texas Talking Book Program, start to finish. I've got Program Engagement Manager Jaclyn here to help me tell the story. Hi Jaclyn!

JACLYN: Hi Alicia! And yes, we're going to explore TBP's entire history—we're not even starting at the Texas part. We're starting before Texas is in the picture at all.

ALICIA: That's right. 1809, to be exact.

JACLYN: 1809! Listeners, get comfortable, because we've got some ground to cover—horse-drawn carriages all the way to Bluetooth-enabled audiobook players.

ALICIA: Let's get into it. Okay, 1809. Picture it: no telephones, no light bulbs, no cars. Thomas Jefferson has just left the White House. And in a small town in France, a baby boy is born named Louis Braille.

JACLYN: Right — and January 4th, his birthday, is celebrated every year as World Braille Day. Braille lost his sight as a child after an accident in his father's workshop, and as a teenager he invented a raised-dot reading system that would eventually change literacy for blind people everywhere.

ALICIA: But here's the thing — it didn't happen overnight. Louis Braille introduced his system in 1829, and it still took almost a century to become the standard in the US. There were competing tactile systems out there with names like New York Point and Line Type, all fighting for dominance.

JACLYN: But it wasn't until 1919 that the Library of Congress's Reading Room for the Blind — which basically was the great-grandparent of the whole National Library Service — started training and certifying braille transcribers. That's really when braille secured its' place for good.

ALICIA: So, picture this quiet reading room in Washington, DC, slowly building a small collection. But the event that really lit the fuse for a national program was World War I.

JACLYN: More than 53,000 American soldiers were killed in that war, and 200,000 more were wounded — many of them blinded by gas attacks or shrapnel. When those veterans came home, there was almost nothing for them to read.

ALICIA: Congress funded some raised-type books for blinded soldiers in the 1920s, but it was small and scattered. There wasn't yet a real system.

JACLYN: And that's right around when Texas enters the story. In 1918, the Texas Legislature stepped in and appropriated \$1,000 — just a thousand — for the Texas State Library to buy raised-letter books and embossed books for Texans who were blind or visually impaired.

ALICIA: That thousand-dollar appropriation would be worth something like \$22,000 today — still a pretty modest sum, but that is the literal first seed of what we now call the Talking Book Program. The books were expensive to produce, so Texas could only buy a small collection, and they mailed them out one at a time— but it's the beginning.

JACLYN: Fast forward about a dozen years. It's 1931. The country is deep in the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover is in the White House, and in Congress, a Representative from New York named Ruth Pratt and a Senator from Utah named Reed Smoot are pushing a bill.

ALICIA: This is the Pratt-Smoot Act, and it's a big deal — Congress agrees to fund a national library program for blind adults, run through the Library of Congress. It became law on March 3, 1931, and that date is still celebrated as the founding of NLS, the National Library Service.

JACLYN: And Texas was right there from the start — one of the original libraries chosen to join the brand-new national network.

ALICIA: Which meant, almost overnight, Texans went from having access to a tiny homegrown collection of tactile books to a much bigger, coordinated national library system. Instead of each local library independently producing accessible materials, the network could share resources, standardize services, and distribute books more efficiently all across the country.

JACLYN: Here's a detail I love: the Pratt-Smoot Act was only 137 words long. But packed into those 137 words was something that still matters today — a promise that veterans would receive priority service. That's not a modern-day policy add-on. It's baked into the program's DNA from day one.

ALICIA: Now here's where it gets fun, because just a couple years later, the 'talking book' is born — literally.

JACLYN: In 1934, the Library of Congress purchases its first talking books — recordings on twelve-inch phonograph discs, made by the American Foundation for the Blind. And get this: they're recorded at 33 and a third revolutions per minute or RPM, less than half the speed of the normal 78 RPM record.

ALICIA: The slower speed meant more recording time per disc, about 15 minutes a side. Fun fact — it would be another 20 years before 33 and a third RPM became the standard speed for commercial music records. NLS was ahead of the curve.

JACLYN: And there's this wonderful, slightly bittersweet story behind those early records. Every talking book from that era was stamped with the words 'Isabelle Archer Dyer Memorial Record.'

ALICIA: Isabelle Archer Dyer... Who was she?

JACLYN: There was this man named Frank Dyer — he was actually Thomas Edison's personal lawyer — who patented a way to slow down records and extend their recording time. When the American Foundation for the Blind wanted to use his patent for talking books, he agreed, on one condition: every single record had to carry his late wife Isabelle's name, in her memory.

ALICIA: Aww, that's lovely. And a year later, in 1935, President Roosevelt signs an order funding the production of 5,000 talking-book machines — basically modified phonographs — so people could actually play these new records at home.

JACLYN: And by the way Helen Keller helped lobby Roosevelt for that funding. She wasn't sold on talking books — she loved braille — but by 1935 she told Roosevelt they were, and I'm paraphrasing here, the most important aid to the blind since braille itself.

ALICIA: So now we've got records, players, and a national network — but the program is still only serving blind adults. Well, that starts to change in the 1950s.

JACLYN: In about 1952, a Congressman from Texas named Kenneth Regan points out something kind of obvious on the House floor: the law was literally called 'An Act to Provide Books for the Adult Blind,' which technically meant blind kids couldn't use the service without sneaking around.

ALICIA: So, Congress just... drops the word 'adult' from the law. Simple fix, huge impact — service officially expands to blind children in 1952.

JACLYN: Then in 1962, music gets added to the collection — braille and large-print sheet music and audio instruction materials. Today it's grown into the largest collection of accessible music materials anywhere in the world.

ALICIA: And then 1966 — another expansion, this time to people with physical disabilities who can't hold a book or turn pages. That one took years of advocacy in Congress before President Johnson finally signed it into law.

JACLYN: By the late 1960s, the technology was shifting too. In 1968 and 1969, cassette tapes started replacing records nationwide, and by the early 1970s, NLS was experimenting with four-track cassettes that would hold six hours of recording — enough for a two-hundred-page book on a single tape.

ALICIA: Picture the era — bell-bottoms, eight-track players in cars — and NLS patrons using these chunky, specialized cassette machines that only played at these unusual slow speeds nobody else used.

JACLYN: In 1974, eligibility expands again, this time to people with qualifying reading disabilities, like dyslexia.

ALICIA: Then 1978 is a huge year for us specifically — that's when TBP launches its own Volunteer Recording Studio right here in Austin, Texas.

JACLYN: Which is still going strong today. Volunteers have recorded more than 2,700 books and magazines about Texas, by Texas authors, and in Spanish — content the national collection wouldn't otherwise have.

ALICIA: Honestly, it's one of my favorite parts of this whole program. Regular Texans donating their time and their voices to the collection.

JACLYN: Agreed. Alright, so we've done records, we've done cassettes — now let's talk about the digital leap, because it takes a minute to unfold.

ALICIA: NLS starts exploring digital recordings in 1992, and actually begins doing it in-house by 1996. But get this — the very last analog-recorded NLS book wasn't finished until 2004. It's a slow, careful transition.

JACLYN: You're right. Meanwhile, in 1999, NLS launches something called Web-Braille, an early way to download electronic braille books over the internet instead of waiting on the mail. It started with just 2,600 titles, but it taught NLS a lot about how online distribution could actually work.

ALICIA: That groundwork pays off. In 2006, NLS starts piloting something for a hundred users called BARD — the Braille and Audio Reading Download service.

JACLYN: NLS BARD gets its official name in 2007, and by 2009, it's open to every single patron with internet access. That same year, NLS also released its first digital talking-book player and the first

digital cartridges — no more cassette tapes. You can think of these digital cartridges as high-capacity flash drives or thumb drives.

ALICIA: And in January of 2011, the very last analog cassette title ships out — it was a cookbook called *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes*. Between 1968 and that final shipment, NLS had produced over 57,000 cassette titles and mailed out more than 49 million copies to network libraries.

JACLYN: That's the end of an era, right there.

ALICIA: Then in 2013, BARD goes mobile — literally. The BARD Mobile app launches for iOS on September 20th, 2013, so for the first time ever, patrons can download books straight to an iPhone or iPad. An Android version follows two years later.

JACLYN: And that same year, Web-Braille folds into BARD completely, so everything — audio and braille — finally lives in one place.

ALICIA: Okay, we're getting close to today. Just a few more milestones before we wrap up.

JACLYN: In 2016, an amendment to the original 1931 Pratt-Smoot Act lets NLS start developing refreshable braille displays — devices with tiny pins that physically raise and lower to form braille letters on the fly. Pilot testing kicked off in 2017.

ALICIA: In 2019, the US formally joins something called the Marrakesh Treaty, which lets countries share accessible-format books across borders. That same year, NLS gets its current name — the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled — reflecting who it actually serves today.

JACLYN: And most recently — this is genuinely brand new — starting in 2025, NLS has started rolling out its new digital talking player called the DA2. It's got Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and enough internal storage to hold 200 or more audiobooks at once. It's replacing the very first digital player from 2009.

ALICIA: Today, what other services does TBP offer beyond books, magazines, and music materials? Oh, I can think of one! Nowadays TBP also offers accessible games. These include braille and large-print card and board games, audio-based games, and information about accessible gaming resources.

JACLYN: Yes! And one of our most popular services is reader's advisory support, where staff work directly with patrons to help them discover new authors, find books that match their reading interests, and navigate the collection. TBP staff can create personalized reading recommendations for them too.

TBP hosts book clubs, summer reading activities, informational webinars, and outreach events that connect patrons with fellow readers and library staff. These programs help foster a sense of community and encourage lifelong learning.

Another valuable offering is the Disability Information and Referral Center or DIRC, which anyone in Texas can contact to get answers to disability-related questions. The DIRC helps connect patrons with organizations, resources, and services related to accessibility, independent living, education, employment, assistive technology, and other disability-related needs. You call 1-800-252-9605 or email DIRC@tsl.texas.gov to request these resources.

ALICIA: Wow. There are so many more offerings nowadays than ever before. So, if you think about the whole arc — we've gone from a \$1,000 appropriation for raised-letter books in 1918, to phonograph records in the '30s, to cassette tapes in the '70s, to a Wi-Fi-connected device that fits in your hand today.

JACLYN: That's more than a century of the exact same mission, just with better technology at every step along the way.

ALICIA: And that mission hasn't changed one bit — get Texans of all ages who are blind, or have a physical disability, or a reading disability like dyslexia, connected to books, for FREE.

JACLYN: That's right. That all may read. So, if you or someone you know might be eligible, applying is simple —head to the Talking Book Program at www.tsl.texas.gov/tbp, fill out an easy application form, get it certified by a professional, and send it back in.

ALICIA: Thank you so much, Jaclyn, for walking through this with me.

JACLYN: It's been my pleasure, Alicia.

ALICIA: Alright, well, that is the end of this episode on the history of TBP. Thank you, and we'll see you on the next one!