

THE STORY OF THE GREENVILLE LIBRARY

ELLEN PERRY*

The Greenville Public Library began its official life in May, 1921, when a group of citizens met and organized the Greenville Public Library Association. This was however, the culmination of years of efforts by many persons to make a library possible.

Greenville, like the rest of South Carolina and the South in general, was very slow in developing library service. Neither public libraries nor public schools made appreciable progress until past the middle of the nineteenth century. When the State Constitution of 1868 set up laws to establish free public schools, few except the children of well-to-do parents had educational opportunities. There was much illiteracy and therefore, little demand for reading materials. By the beginning of the twentieth century Greenville with a population of approximately 10,000 had two white and two Negro schools - with fifteen white and nine Negro teachers. In addition, the eleven cotton mills immediately outside the city had built and partly financed the operations of schools for the children of their employees.

At this time one library existed. The Neblett Free Library Association which had been incorporated on February 27, 1877, by a group of eleven men and women. The library was located on the property of Mrs. A. Viola Neblett on the corner of Westfield Street and West McBee Avenue. On March 1, 1899, this property was deeded by Mrs. Neblett to the trustees of the Association. By 1900 the number of volumes in the library had grown to over 3,000 (nearly all gifts). The first librarian was Miss Havilene Thompkins. She was succeeded by Mrs. Rebecca Deal, who for years was the devoted and efficient custodian. In August 1927, the Trustees of the Neblett Free Library Association conveyed the property and all assets to Greenville City School district 17, on condition that the real estate and property should be used for the maintenance of a free public library (the Neblett Free Library) for the use of the schools and public of

*This paper is abridged from Miss Perry's *Free Reading for Everybody: the Story of the Greenville County Library* (Greenville, S. C.: Keys Printing Co., 1973).

the said city of Greenville. The Neblett Library continued in operation until the Greenville Public Library was established. During this period there were available several "traveling libraries" from different sources, the libraries from the Sunday Schools of the various denominations, and the lending libraries established by the Thursday Club of Greenville.

Such were the library facilities of Greenville at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the next decade, various moves were made toward the establishment of a library. One of these was to make use of the "Record Building" as the old Court House was commonly called. This went so far as to have an act passed by the General Assembly in 1916, establishing a corporation - the Greenville County Library. Although this movement was received favorably the plan was never carried out.

During 1919 the Public Library movement was brought forcibly before the citizens, when Mr. J. W. Norwood, deeply interested in public libraries, gave a banquet at the Imperial (later the Greenville) Hotel to honor the Rotary Club and some thirty or forty guests. The speaker, Judge Charles S. Woods of the United States Circuit Court of Appeals, made a forceful and stimulating address. Although the results of Judge Wood's address were more or less intangible, immediate interest was aroused in the subject and a desire created to see library facilities made available in Greenville. A more or less direct result of this meeting was to focus the attention of Thomas F. Parker, one of the city's most farseeing and public-spirited citizens, on the library situation. Mr. Parker became greatly concerned and eventually was responsible for founding the library. Under his leadership the many individuals and groups who had promoted the public library movement were united in a common cause.

In May 1921, at Mr. Parker's invitation, a group of about three dozen met and formed the Greenville Public Library Association. The membership included the heads of The Chamber of Commerce, the American Legion, the Ministerial Union, Young Men's Business League, the City Schools, the colleges, and several other organizations. The aims of the Association as set forth in Article 2 of its Constitution which read as follows: "The object of this Association shall be the

establishment and maintenance of a free public library in Greenville, South Carolina, and the promotion of the modern library movement in the City and County of Greenville." At the organizational meeting on May 2, a Board of seven directors was elected with Mr. Parker at its head.

To finance the establishment of the library, \$5,000 was privately donated. Miss Annie S. Porter, formerly of Savannah, was secured as librarian. The Board and Miss Porter, in setting up the library, decided to emphasize accessibility, publicity, and a high standard of service, rather than impressive surroundings. This long continued to be the policy in regard to the operation of the library.

A small store building on East Coffee Street just off Main was rented, plain pine shelves, tables and chairs installed, and a carefully selected collection of 500 books put in place. On the evening of May 19, 1921, the Board of Directors and their guests were invited to inspect the library. The next day, May 20, the doors were opened to the public. Since it was privately financed, residents of both county and city were urged to use it. The library hours were from 2 until 9 p.m. - daily except Sunday.

The Library was an immediate success. A mezzanine had to be opened and within a few months the adjoining building rented. When the donated funds were almost exhausted, the Board of Directors appealed to the public to continue the service. A campaign was held to raise \$10,000 and at the same time a petition was circulated asking for a referendum to be held to decide whether the city wanted a free public library. The \$10,000 was raised and on August 29, 1922, by a special election, a permissive tax of two mills was voted for the support of a public library in the city. Then the City Council, under the terms of the State Library Law, appointed a board of five members, J. W. Norwood, Miss J. M. Perry, Thomas F. Parker, Mrs. H. H. Harris and J. M. Russell. Mr. Parker was elected Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Greenville Public Library. The directors of the Greenville Public Library Association then turned over to the Public Library Board all its books and other assets. The sum raised by public subscription was used to operate the library until the tax revenue became

available January 1, 1923. The hours were changed to 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily except Sunday and continued so for years.

Feeling that a more experienced and highly trained person was needed, Miss Porter resigned as librarian. She recommended as her successor, Miss Charlotte Templeton of Atlanta, at that time director of the Georgia State Library Commission. Miss Templeton became head of the Greenville Library September 1, 1923, with Miss Porter continuing as a member of the staff.

The library continued to expand, and larger quarters had to be found. The Chairman secured a lease on the three story addition planned for the Jervy-Jordan office building on North Main Street. This provided an entrance from Main Street through an arcade, and another from Brown Street in the rear. The building was completed in the fall of 1923, and on February 1, 1924, the library was moved from its crowded quarters on Coffee Street to the new home. The move was a cooperative affair, with help being given from many quarters, including the Boy Scouts, who carried loads of books in little red wagons.

Library service for the city residents being well established, the Board then considered another step in expanding the service.

In 1923, a new school district had been formed by consolidating five former districts immediately outside the city limits. This district (called the Parker District) embraced fourteen progressive suburban and industrial communities with a large population. Mr. Parker again offered to sponsor library service for this area. As it was largely populated by workers in the various mills (each had its own village), it was necessary to devise a way to reach the different communities. The problem was solved by the purchase of a small truck equipped to serve as a library. A body was attached with shelves on each side, so arranged that by lifting glass doors, the books would be circulated. A schedule was worked out so that several communities could be reached each week. On October 11, 1923, the "Pathfinder" made its first stop. This first "book-on-wheels" bore the slogan: "Free Reading for Everybody."

The first year of operation was financed by Mr. Parker with Mr. Norwood's assistance. The service having proved a great

success and economically sound, the Parker school district (under Superintendent Lawrence Peter Hollis) took over the work.

The second demonstration having been well established, Mr. Parker and Miss Templeton decided upon a further advance, turning next to the rural communities of the county, where large numbers had no access to library service. Mr. Parker with Mr. Norwood's assistance again offered to finance a demonstration. The service was planned to begin with the rural schools. The sponsors agreed to give \$10,000 a year for a two-year period, feeling that one year would not be sufficient to test the plan. A three-quarter ton Dodge truck was fitted with a specially designed body, built locally, a stock of books chosen and processed and Miss Porter placed in charge, assisted by Miss Ellen Perry who had joined the staff in November, 1924. The first visit to a school (Berea) was made on January 19, 1925 and the truck got stuck in the mud! This was the first of many such adventures for when County Library service began there were few miles of paving outside the city.

In planning this service Mr. Parker wrote, "I think the success [of the work] depends largely on the personality of the librarian who goes with the truck, as this attempt should be made through the teacher and the school." Mr. Parker's judgment (as usual) proved sound, and his advice was followed. Unlike most mobile library services, the Greenville Library never employed drivers for their trucks. The young ladies responsible for distributing the books, successfully steered the trucks, regardless of roads or weather.

From the beginning of library service in Greenville it was planned to include all citizens regardless of race or place of residence. Soon after the library was opened, a case of especially chosen new books was placed in the Phyllis Wheatly Center on East McBee Avenue, in charge of one of the staff, the funds for this again being privately donated. In January, 1923, after the City Library tax funds became available, provision was made in the library budget for this service. When the Phyllis Wheatly Center was moved in 1926 to the new building on East Broad Street a large front room was made available for the library, the space rented from the Center.

The Chairman of the Board, being constantly on the alert for ways to extend the service of the Library, wrote in the spring of 1926 to the presidents of the eleven mills immediately surrounding the city telling them of the collection of books on textiles already in the library and asking for a contribution to enlarge and improve this collection. Each company was asked to make a contribution of one dollar per thousand spindles. At that time the eleven mills had 565,700 spindles, so the library received the sum of \$619.00 from the mills for its collection on textiles.

On December 31, 1926, the library suffered an irreparable loss in the sudden death of Mr. Thomas F. Parker, the dedicated chairman of the Board of Trustees. In February, 1927, Mr. F. W. Symnes was elected Chairman.

The mobile service for the County, begun in 1924 under the direction of Miss Porter, was continued as a demonstration privately financed until an election was held on September 13, 1927. At which time a one-mill county tax levy for library service was voted. The service to the Parker District and the rural areas which had operated as separate units were then consolidated to form a newly organized County Department of the library with Miss Porter at its head. Five trustees were appointed for the County - E. A. Webster, Mrs. E. B. Nash, V. M. Babb, Dr. P. J. Johnston, and Miss Elsie Barton. At a joint meeting of the City and County Boards, a plan was adopted for the future operation of library service for the City and County. The Articles of Agreement provided: (1) All residents of Greenville County Library District shall be entitled to all privileges and resources of the Greenville Public Library, in return for compensation to be fixed, each year by the two Boards of Trustees, (2) funds accruing from the County Library tax shall be expended by the County Library Board according to a budget adopted by the Board, (3) the librarian of the Greenville Public Library shall serve as the Librarian of the Greenville County Library.

In August, 1931, another outreach service was begun. A specially designed cart was bought to carry books to the patients at the Greenville General Hospital. An assistant from the library visited the hospital twice a week to circulate the books.

In September, 1931, Miss Templeton resigned to accept a position in Atlanta. She was succeeded by Miss Fanny T. Taber, formerly field worker for the Alabama Library Association. During 1932 and 1933, the library, like other tax supported institutions faced great difficulties during those depression years. Taxes were in arrears, and at times the staff could not be paid, even at greatly reduced salaries. The janitor was the only person to be paid (largely from fines). No new work could be attempted, but the library service was continued, being, as Miss Taber said, even more important during hard times. As the depression receded and conditions improved, the County Department was able to expand its service. In the City, a small branch was opened on Augusta Street on a lot owned and loaned by Mr. L. O. Patterson. "So Big," as it was affectionately called was probably the smallest branch in the County with floor space of six by four and a half feet and only seven feet high. It was built at a cost of \$24.50 for materials and utilized labor furnished by the Works Progress Administration. At this time a worthwhile project was undertaken in the main library: a "Made from Library Books Fair." Exhibits, including a great variety of objects were shown, with the books used beside them. One of the most popular displays was a baby in a high chair, with the book on Infant Care used by his parents! In 1934, the hours for library service were extended by opening the Adult Department for three hours on Sunday afternoon.

The lease on the Jervey-Jordan building expired December 31, 1936, and could not be renewed, as the building was to be remodeled for other uses. It was very difficult to find quarters offering sufficient space, but the Brawley garage was secured. This was a two-unit structure, the larger opening on Laurens Street, the smaller on College Street with the two connected by a passage way on the second floor level. These quarters provided space but otherwise were poorly adapted to library use. The move was made late in December, 1936, open house was held on January 5, 1937. The work was carried on with great difficulty - no new projects being possible.

An important event in the County work was the opening of the Davenport Branch Library in Greer - the lot and \$5,000.00 having been given by the Davenport family of Greer.

In 1939, the Greenville Library Board purchased from the City School trustees the Park School and grounds on North Main Street for the sum of \$32,500. Extensive repairs and alterations adapted the building for library use. An appeal for contributions was made and approximately \$10,000 was contributed for the purpose. On February 10, 1940, the library was moved into its new home, the first to be owned by the Library. Shortly after this move, Miss Taber resigned to take a position in New Jersey. On March 1, 1940, Miss Perry, the head of the Children's department, became acting librarian. The renovated building with a garage added for the County Department gave much badly needed space. An assembly room opening from the Children's Department proved very useful, not only for the very popular weekly story hours, but for community gatherings by many groups.

A notable event during 1940 was the visit of Archibald MacLeish the Librarian of Congress. His visit was arranged by Miss Porter, County Librarian, and at the time President of the South Carolina Library Association. Mr. MacLeish addressed a joint meeting of the South Carolina Library Association and the Citizens Library Association.

A new project was begun by the County Department: the County Materials Bureau, under the direction of Miss Porter, County Librarian, and Mr. W. A. Norvell, Rural Schools Supervisor. Agencies supporting this work were: the County Library, County Department of Education, the rural schools and the American Council on Teacher Education. This proved a valuable aid in the work of the rural schools.

In the Adult Department of the library a "Young People's Alcove" was set up. Planned to help those just promoted from the Children's Department, it proved exceedingly popular with older readers.

With Pearl Harbor occurring on December 7, 1941, the library felt the accelerated war preparations. There was constant change of staff as members left to take more highly paid positions, and of course no trained help could be found to replace them. The County Department faced tire and gas rationing as well as staff shortage.

With Donaldson Air Base located in Greenville and the first troops arriving in July, 1942, the facilities of the Library were made available to military personnel and their families. Special cards were issued to them (2200 in all). At the request of the Commanding Officer, the Librarian set up a library in an unused room at the Base. One of the contractors donated shelves; books were processed from the Victory Book campaign gifts, and the W.P.A. and the Base supplied staff. Under the Librarian's direction a library was operated for six or eight months before an Army Librarian arrived. A book cart was improvised (Dixie Home Store - now Wynn-Dixie - supplied the wheels) and books were circulated in three wards of the base hospital for many weeks before the Red Cross arrived.

In Simpsonville and Fountain Inn, library service was made available in buildings provided by both towns.

Changes came rapidly during the war years and the decade following. The library was fortunate in receiving numerous gifts of books and periodicals. In addition a radio victrola with a large collection of records was given as a memorial, a handsome United States Flag and staff were donated and first flown on Flag Day, June 14, 1942. Much appreciated were the twelve fairy tale paintings by Elizabeth Dolan, given to the Children's Department by Dr. R. E. Houston in memory of his mother. The County suffered the loss of Mr. D. L. Bramlett, for fifteen years Chairman of the County Board. Miss Porter retired after thirty years as head of the County Work, to be succeeded by Miss Mary Cox. The Library system was placed under the State Retirement system set up originally for the teachers. A building on East McBee Avenue was bought to house the Negro Branch which was hampered in the crowded quarters in the Phyllis Wheatly Center. Plans were made to add a fireproof room to house the South Carolina collection and other valuable material. Miss Perry retired May 1, 1952. Mr. Charles E. Stow, who had joined the staff the year before, became librarian - the fifth to hold the position. The building for the Negro Branch was renovated and occupied in June, 1952, offering improved service to the borrowers. During 1953-1954, the County service was expanded. A sedan delivery truck was purchased. An adult deposit station opened, and the first two direct service stops for

Negro service added.

By the mid-fifties the facilities on Main Street were inadequate for the expanding library. To the librarian's report for 1954 was added the following note: "The Greenville Public Library has reached a point where it must either formulate a plan for its future development and embark on that program, or lose the preeminent position it has held among the public libraries of the state."

In June 1955, the Library Board secured J. Russell Bailey, a library consultant and architect, to make a survey of the library. Mr. Bailey's report stated: "I am convinced that any major additions or alterations should not be made to the present structure which is not fireproof, nor originally planned for a library." The report then suggested changes that could be made to make the building temporarily more usable and attractive.

In May, 1957, the Library suffered a great loss in the death of its Chairman - Mr. F. W. Symnes who had been elected to that position in February 1927. Mr. Romaine Barnes became Chairman six months later. The next year the Board lost another faithful and efficient member by the death of Mr. E. A. Gilfillin, for many years the treasurer. In 1958, the service to the Hospital was discontinued due to the growth of the hospital and the limited resources of the library.

In 1959, Miss Ruth Walker, on the staff of the Greenville News and long concerned over library problems, made a study of the situation, and brought it to the attention of B. O. Thomason, Jr., member of the County delegation. A special committee of three delegation members, with Mr. Thomason as Chairman, made a detailed study of the library situation, the result being submitted to the 1960 session of the State Legislature. The report began - "The Greenville Public Library is dying a slow death by strangulation because of a lack of funds." In conclusion there were recommendations which had been approved by both City and County library boards and by the City Council. The Greenville Delegation introduced these recommendations revised into a bill during the 1961 session of the State Legislature. The bill passed and was signed by the Governor July 1, 1961. The most important provisions were the

consolidation of the city and county libraries into a permanent county service (to be known as the Greenville County Library) and setting a library tax of two and a quarter mills for the support of the library.

Another event of 1960 was the formation of a branch of the Friends of the Library, with Mr. Arthur Magill as President. This was first proposed by Miss Taber in 1940.

A new era of library service began with the passage of the 1961 bill. The newly created County Library with Charles E. Stowe as Librarian and Miss Mary S. Cox as assistant was able to begin operation with an income of \$206,760 (An increase over the previous year of nearly \$100,000). This amount, with additional funds from the State Library Board, made new services possible. An enlarged staff and four new bookmobiles assured a great extension of the work of the library. In November, 1961, two new branches were opened, one in Travelers Rest using space in the Federal Savings and Loan building, and the other in Mauldin in a small building owned by the town. A year later a library building was given to Mauldin by the "Her Majesty's Foundation," as a memorial to Langdon Cheves. The Library Board arranged to participate in a three-year demonstration sponsored by the State Library Board. In addition to providing the sum of \$45,000, the State Board would furnish help with various projects.

During the next few years, the Library was expanded as to assets and services. Several valuable gifts were received. Among these were the large geophysical globe presented by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Magill, and a new branch library by the Beaunit Corporation to the town of Fountain Inn. In 1965 came the notable gift of \$100,000 from the Symnes Foundation, for the purchase of a lot for a new building.

The Greenville County Library, now being integrated, in 1965 the McBee Avenue Branch was closed and its personnel and assets correlated into the main library.

The long dreamed of new building became a reality when to the one and a quarter million dollar bond issue was added the sum of a quarter million each from the State Library Board, the Appalachian Planning and Development Commission, and in

July 1968, the magnificent gift of a half million from the Symmes Foundation.

Ground breaking for the new building was held on July 30, 1968, with many prominent guests present. The \$2,300,000 new building was completed and the opening took place on May 24, 1970, with ceremonies held in the Thomas F. Parker Auditorium. As Ralph W. Blakely, Chairman of the Greenville County Council told those present, "This is your day, and you have waited a long time for it." The following morning the Library was opened to the public.

The year 1971 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the library. The event was marked by an exhibit in the South Carolina Room graphically presenting the development of the Library. Simple exercises were held in the Thomas F. Parker Auditorium on May 20, exactly fifty years from the day the Library first opened. The exercises closed with the presentation to Dr. Thomas Parker of a booklet in appreciation of the service rendered to the library by his father.

The Greenville County Library faces a great future. Housed in one of the finest library buildings in the Southeast, with adequate tax support, and a large and, in the main, experienced and trained staff with the necessary equipment to increase their efficiency, the library should forge ahead.

This sketch might well close with the words of the wise and farseeing Founder. In a report to the Board in July 1926, Mr. Thomas F. Parker wrote: "This library from its earliest days has had high aims and requirements of service from its Board as well as its Staff. We have great adventures in prospect, and a past of which we need not be ashamed. We are faced not only by the need for securing much needed crude dollars, but also with developing successfully, and employing vigorously means to popularize the abundant use of good books in this city and county. We need a vision of the profound educational and broadening influence that an adequate free public library can exercise in our community."