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## The Dulcina Deberry Library

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Maulsby: The Dulcina DeBerry Library



Mrs. Dulcina DeBerry as a young woman. (She lived to be 91.)



Mrs. Elizabeth Parks Beamgard is seen awarding reading certificates to children at the Dulcina DeBerry Library on Pelham Street.

Ann Geiger Maulsby

On May 31, 1940, the branch library for the Negro community of Huntsville, Alabama, was started in the basement of the Lakeside Methodist Church on Jefferson Street. This was a project of the Works Progress Administration<sup>1</sup>

Dulcina Deberry, who was well qualified for the position, served as first director of this branch. She had been a teacher in North Carolina and was active in the Lakeside Methodist Church.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. DeBerry was in Huntsville at this time because her mother, Violet (Mrs. Henry) Torrence, a Huntsville resident, was in ill health and needed care.<sup>3</sup>

The Director of Regional Library Services, Mr. Hoyt Galvin,<sup>4</sup> gave Mrs. DeBerry a key to the church basement, told her to see what she could find and to make something of it if she could. She found a dark, damp room furnished with two ugly unpainted tables, two rough benches, and a schoolroom desk with no chair. The holdings, 27 juvenile volumes, 39 books for adults, and 10 used magazines, were stored in a large unpainted drygoods box. Mrs. DeBerry had ten days to get all in order for the library opening, June 10, 1940. She and her helpers, two high school boys, painted the six pieces of furniture and thoroughly cleaned the basement. The minister's wife, Mrs. Z. K. Jackson, donated a chair for the librarian to use. A group of young girls gave pots of growing flowers to decorate the window seats.<sup>5</sup>

Handbills furnished by the main library as well as newspaper notices announced the opening date. By then the Bookmobile had delivered additional books and magazines from the Huntsville Library, so the new branch opened with a total of 60 books for young readers, 79 adult books, and 20 used magazines. In a few weeks the number of patrons grew from fewer than 10 to nearly 30. Every two weeks the main library exchanged the books and delivered special requests. Many teachers and college students used this service.<sup>6</sup>

Thirty-nine children registered in the Vacation Reading Club which opened June 15, 1940. Twenty-three of those children completed their required reading and received reading certificates in a ceremony on August 31, the end of summer vacation. Principals of schools, ministers of the churches, leading citizens and families of the children attended. For the first time the people of the area came together to see what the library had to offer and to learn what the people could do for it. Someone suggested that an organization be formed to help sponsor the library. A Board of Directors was named which consisted of Dr. Joseph Drake, President of Alabama A & M College, Dr. R. S. Beard, Mrs. Myrtle Turner, principal of Winston Street School, Mr. Leroy Lowery, and Mr. Shelby Johnson.<sup>7</sup>

The library held a Children's Story Hour every Friday afternoon, led by the librarian or an invited storyteller. The programs included songs and games. On the last Friday of each month the mothers of the participants could attend.<sup>8</sup>

In October of 1940 the library offered its services to the Madison County schools, so that teachers were able to use library books in their classrooms. Thirty schools participated. The library gave used magazines, newspapers and pamphlets to the county schools for students to use for posters and other assignments.<sup>9</sup>

Heating the basement of the Methodist Church was a problem to the librarian, and sponsors began to look for a suitable place to move the library. Mrs. Myrtle Turner, secretary of the Board of Directors and principal of Winston Street School, offered a room in that school. The city Superintendent of Education, W. G. Hamm, approved on condition that the librarian be qualified to teach in the public school system. Mrs. DeBerry qualified, and on November 30, 1940, the library was relocated to the Winston Street School.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the new library became the Winston Street Branch. The room was large and well lighted, but had no library furniture. After much thought, the Board planned the Negro Book Week Musical Benefit as a money-maker to properly furnish the library. On February 16, 1941, the Alabama A & M College presented the program. It made enough money to buy materials, and workers in a local National Youth Association workshop constructed the equipment and furniture needed--a book locker, two library tables, eight chairs, a bulletin board, one large magazine rack, and two display shelves.<sup>11</sup>

The Second Annual Musical Benefit presented music from the Council High School Glee Club, the Oakwood College Chorus, the Council High School Choir, and the Winston Street School Chorus. Money from this benefit purchased 100 books for young readers. The Third Annual Musical was an even greater success; the proceeds from this event bought more bookshelves which were needed for the library's expanding book collection.<sup>12</sup>

The Winston Street Branch Library concentrated on serving the children of the Negro community. Two-thirds of the patrons were young readers. The special activities for children included Story Hour, the Vacation Reading Club, a Holiday Book Party during the Christmas season, and an Annual Library Tag Day. The proceeds from the Tag Day helped pay for the subscriptions to children's magazines--*Jack and Jill*, *Wee Wisdom*, *Child Life*, *The American Girl*, and *Boy's Life*. The tags were made by the school children; each child was encouraged to buy a tag for one cent and wear it to show his support for the library. By the end of three years, the Winston Street Branch Library, under the direction of Mrs. DeBerry, had approximately 4,000 books and 12 subscriptions

to standard magazines in a well-equipped small library, owing to the efforts of community leaders.<sup>13</sup>

Winston Street School itself was a product of the Works Progress Administration. The Huntsville Board of Education made plans in January of 1938 to secure options on property for a site for a proposed Negro school building. By April 1 of the same year, they had selected the lot situated on the corner of Winston and Yarbrough Streets. The school opened in the fall of 1939 as an elementary school and operated for 19 years. In 1958 the children of that area began attending the new Calvary Hill School on Poplar Avenue. In 1984 this became the Academy for Academics and Art, a magnet school. In the 1980s the building which housed the Winston Street School was demolished to make room for the I-565 highway through Huntsville.<sup>14</sup>

On May 1, 1943, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), started by President Franklin Roosevelt in July of 1935, ceased operation. The Huntsville Library Board in its September meeting voted to open a branch in the Winston Street School, to be supervised by a qualified member of the school faculty, Mrs. DeBerry. Thus the Huntsville Library system assumed financial responsibility for the branch library.<sup>15</sup>

In 1947 the library moved from Winston Street School to a building owned by the Huntsville Board of Education on Pelham Street, near Council High School, a spacious and more convenient location for the public it served. Mrs. Elizabeth P. Beamgard, director of the Huntsville Public Library, was instrumental in obtaining the use of the building which the library used for three years. Soon after the move from Winston Street School, the name of the branch became The Dulcina DeBerry Library.<sup>16</sup>

Dulcina DeBerry reported in 1950 that more than 5,400 books of all types were circulated in the previous year. More than 1,500 books and magazines were *distributed* to children in the Summer Reading Program. The proceeds of the annual music festival still provided books and furnishings for the library. The musical benefit programs continued at least until 1952.<sup>17</sup>

In June of 1951 the library moved to Church Street, where it shared a two-story building with the Church Street Community Center. The Center occupied the first floor, with Mrs. Nannie Brandon as Director. The large area of the second floor housed the library facilities, including the children's room, the adult room, and the office of the library director.<sup>18</sup>

Mrs. DeBerry returned to her home in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1951. The DeBerrys later moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where Mrs. DeBerry died in 1969 at the age of 91.<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. Fannie Jackson, who had been the assistant librarian, became the Director of Dulcina DeBerry Library after Mrs. DeBerry moved away, and remained director until April 1, 1956. When Mrs. Jackson resigned, the members of the Board of Directors were Mr. O. Z. Scott, President of Alabama A & M College, Professor Henry Torrence, Mrs. Fannie Fearn, Rev. T. H. Huston, Rev. C. B. Foxx, Mrs. P. Horton, Dr. and Mrs. H. C. Fearn, Mrs. E. B. Rowe, and Mrs. Fannie Jackson. The Reverend H. P. Snodgrass, who had helped Mrs. Jackson during her time as director, became Director of Dulcina DeBerry Branch Library on April 1, 1956. Miss Dorothy Webb was Director of the Huntsville Public Library at the time. When Calvary Hill School opened in 1958, Reverend Snodgrass managed both the school library and the DeBerry Library.<sup>20</sup>

Civil Rights Acts passed by Congress in the 1960s gave black Americans voting rights, equal access to public accommodations, and made discrimination in housing, employment and education illegal. By the early 1960s the Carnegie Library building on Madison Street was too small for Huntsville and Madison County. On December 28, 1965, the new Huntsville Public Library building on Fountain Row opened its doors to the public, and all citizens of Madison County were welcomed.<sup>21</sup>

The Urban Renewal Program came to Huntsville in the 1960s, and Church Street became a part of that program. The Community Center, funded by the United Givers Fund, was demolished. The branch library moved to a dwelling in Edmonton Heights, a neighborhood near Alabama A & M College. In August of 1968 the Library Board decided to use more Bookmobiles and phase out "the former DeBerry Library, now housed in Edmonton Heights." The Huntsville Library Board closed the Dulcina DeBerry Library on October 1, 1968.<sup>22</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dulcina DeBerry, *Accomplishments of the Winston Street Branch Library of Huntsville, Alabama, From 1940 to 1943*. Unpublished manuscript located in the Archives of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Obituary of Dulcina DeBerry in Cleveland, Ohio, newspaper, 1969, courtesy of Mrs. Henry S. Torrence, May 25, 1990, who was interviewed on that date.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Vertical file, *Huntsville Library, 1940-1960*, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

<sup>5</sup>"History of Dulcina DeBerry Library," author unknown, unpublished and on file in Archives, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, 1957.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid..

<sup>14</sup>Interview with Barbara Coffee, staff member, Academy for Academics and Art, April 6, 1995.

<sup>15</sup>*Huntsville Times*, May 2, 1943.

<sup>16</sup>*Huntsville Times*, July 2, 1947.

<sup>17</sup>*Huntsville Times*, August 3, 1950; April 3, 1952.

<sup>18</sup>Letter from Elizabeth Parks Beamgard, Librarian, to Dr. Harvey D. Nelson, Superintendent of Education, Huntsville, AL, May 21, 1951.

<sup>19</sup>Dulcina DeBerry obituary.

<sup>20</sup>Letter from Dorothy Webb, Librarian, to Mrs. Charles Handley, February 29, 1956; *Huntsville Times*, September 3, 1958.

<sup>21</sup>Christina H. Russell, *The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregation Policy*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 1-2; *Huntsville Times*, December 28, 1965.

<sup>22</sup>Minutes of the United Givers Fund Board Meeting, November 21, 1967; Minutes of Library Board Meeting, August 1968; October 1, 1968.