

A Sketch of the Parish Library Movement in Vermilion

I have not used many quotations in this paper as it is ALL quoted and my sources were many and scattered. Much of the material about the library was taken from the bulletin prepared in 1942 by a committee of Charter Members of the Woman's Club of Abbeville, who were in on the ground floor of the movement in Abbeville and later in Vermilion Parish.

Just what was life like in Abbeville right after the turn of the century at the time when Mrs. W. B. White, who organized the Woman's Club, spearheaded the movement through the newly organized club, to establish a library for the town? It is hard for us today to realize what life without books and reading material could be like. And now we have so many other sources of entertainment and information at hand. . . radio, television, countless theaters at a stone's throw from Abbeville, fast cars and fine highways to take us to weekly football games, the races, the opera and fine musical plays. But such was not the case in 1906. The town could boast of an "electric theater" on Madeline Square, put up by Mr. Albert Nauck, who was also responsible for the earliest lighting system in the town. Mr. Nauck came to Abbeville in 1901 and, under a five year franchise from the town, built his own generating plant and wired the homes of those desiring electricity. Later the town took over the plant and he remained until 1918 as Plant Superintendent. Then Mr. Johnny Frank succeeded him. Mr. Nauck's first theater was a tent, but later he built a more permanent one on Concord Street on the site of a theater some of you will recall.

Though I found only a brief sentence about it, there was mention of an Abbeville Literary Society, organized in 1874 by Dr. Walter White and Lestie Broussard. Membership was good and the society purchased quite a library for the town. This later became the nucleus for the first public library.

There was a convent run by the Sisters of Mount Carmel, which had been established in 1885. A new brick courthouse, replacing the one which had burned, along with many of the earliest parish records, had just been built at the cost of \$28,000. It is described as a handsome edifice, an honor to the town and to the parish. There was a public school system for both white and colored, under the supervision of the Vermilion Parish School Board.

Listed are eleven lawyers, quite a few doctors and numerous merchants.

In 1890 an ice factory was built. There were dirt streets which became impassible in the rainy season. One merchant, a Mr. Isaacs, who had a department store where Stauffer's store is now . . . in jest . . . would set up a fishing pole outside his store in a deep mudhole after each heavy rain. Board walks ran along the main thoroughfares and transportation was limited to horse or mule-drawn

vehicles, with an occasional ox cart. There were, of course, buggies, sulkies and surries for the women and families and fine saddle horses for the men. On Saturday afternoons the hitching racks were lined with Creole ponies, while their riders, clad in wide brimmed hats and home-made cottenade clothes clanked through the stores making necessary purchases or gathered in groups on the Courthouse Square to discuss crops, politics, et cetera. The women, in sun-bonnets and long full skirts, were exchanging their produce for commodities or clothes. French was the language heard everywhere. Cows wandered at large and the houses were, for the most part, unpainted. The original town was on the east side of the bayou and ran 848 feet frontage on the bayou by a depth of 1,979 feet eastward. By 1906 many people lived on the west side of the bayou and there was a large iron bridge. The population was about two thousand. The business section was now built mainly of brick due to recent disastrous fires. The only communication with the outside world was over roads, many times impassible, or by steamboat from Morgan City. The whistles of the Barmore and the Maxie S. heralding the arrival of a load of goods had not long been silenced. The arrival of the new branchline train brought in mail, freight and an occasional visitor.

The Veranda Hotel, on the site of the Audrey Hotel, was a mecca for travellers in this section, who came in search of fish and game in season. There was a new brick schoolhouse with a fine group of Peabody graduates as teachers, brought to Abbeville by A. M. Smith, who was then Superintendent of Education. S. L. I. (now the University of Southwestern Louisiana) had opened in 1901 with an enrollment of 145 students, thus bringing higher education closer to our doors.

Abbeville was a town emerging from a pioneer state. A spirit of progress was in evidence on every hand, but it did not entirely crowd out the spirit of lawlessness which exists where cattle-stealing, Sunday night duels and contested political campaigns were so fresh in the memory of most citizens.

Abbeville was an interesting town, hospitable, cosmopolitan, if such a word can be used of so small a community, and possessed of a friendly spirit. And it was in such a town that Mrs. White in 1907 suggested that there was a need for a public library and committees from the Woman's Club went into action. Mrs. Nettles was to secure quarters, Mrs. F. A. Godchaux to secure funds from the town, and in less than a month the new library was opened with fitting ceremonies in Godard's Hall on Concord Street. The town had appropriated ten dollars a month and lights. Donations of books had been added to the circulating library and many subscriptions to magazines had been given. Miss Maude Numez was appointed librarian and the hours were from ten A. M. to nine P. M. Her salary was fifteen dollars a month.

Now that the library was in existence, the club felt justified in canvassing the town for subscriptions to maintain it. This they did in unbelievable bad winter weather, but they secured over five hundred dollars which was expended on books and equipment. From time to time, they gave gumbos, lawn fetes and festivals to raise money. One outstanding entertainment was held at the library in February 1908 at which citizens came dressed to represent the titles of books or characters in history or fiction. It was a dignified, beautifully conducted ball, which was a great success financially and a memorable event socially.

But it was realized by the leaders of the movement that a public library could not attain its greatest usefulness if supported by these methods, successful though they were, but that the entire community should have a part in its maintenance.

There was no Library Association or Library Law in Louisiana at this time as a charter had to be drawn up under existing laws. This was done by Attorneys William White and Felix Samson. The Abbeville Public Library Association was thus created, its object being "the continuance and maintaining of the Public Library established by the Woman's Club". An annual membership fee was fixed at one dollar and the administration of its affairs was vested in a Board of Directors of which the president of the Woman's Club and the Mayor of Abbeville were ex-officio members. The first board elected was Mrs. W. B. White, Mrs. G. E. Summers, W. P. Edwards, Dr. Allan Eustis, A. J. Golden, D. L. McPherson, and Jonas Weill. Mrs. Summers and D. L. McPherson served on this board continuously for thirty-four years.

The minutes of the board show a gradual increase in the number of books and readers and in the civic interests which centered around the library. In April 1909, the library was moved into the Town Hall, facing Madeline Square, where it thrived until 1911, when as so often happens with institutions supported by private subscription, it was closed for lack of funds. There was a dormant period from 1911 to 1916. In 1916, due to the efforts of the Woman's Club, a speaker from the Wisconsin Library Commission, spoke to a large and enthusiastic audience in Abbeville insisting that libraries must either be tax supported or maintained by appropriations from tax levying bodies.. that they were an important part of our educational system and should be treated as such.. With this goal in mind the Library Board met, filled vacancies, applied for and secured funds from the Town Council and reopened in March of 1916. The Woman's Club donated equipment for a card catalog and a collection of recent books to help stimulate interest in the re-opened library. In order to conserve funds, the club members agreed to keep the library open two afternoons a week. This they did for eight years, serving in all kinds of weather, often in unheated quarters. It was a labor of love, but the satisfaction of

-serving the community and seeing the craving for books by both adults and children outweighed all else. Even the paid librarians, Mrs. Mary Ryan and Mrs. J. E. LeBlanc, who succeeded the club members, received a bare pittance of ten dollars a month. So theirs too was a labor of love.

The world was at war at this time and the library collected and shipped books to Army camps. Many other war activities were carried on at the library, which had developed into a community center. In 1918 Mrs. A. F. Storm, who was then president of the Third District of the Louisiana Federation of Women's Clubs began her struggle to make Louisiana a library state. It was through her untiring efforts that a law creating the Louisiana Library Commission was passed. The law carried no appropriation and the five commissioners appointed by Governor Parker paid their own expenses until 1922 when a mere one thousand dollars was appropriated for their use.

In 1925 it was learned that the Carnegie Foundation had funds to be spent in the South and because Louisiana had a library law and an organized Library Commission, the state was chosen over thirteen other applicants to receive fifteen thousand dollars annually for a three year demonstration of the parish library system. The choice of Miss Essae Culver as an executive secretary of the Louisiana Library Commission was a fortunate one. As a result of her untiring efforts, Louisiana developed a fine parish library system. This apparent diversion into a discussion of library development in the state is relevant because without its simultaneous growth, the goal in Vermilion could never have been achieved.

Meanwhile in Vermilion, interest continued. Gueydan and Kaplan had established town libraries and their citizens were library-minded and ready to join in any parish-wide movement, as were those in Abbeville.

In 1930 Miss Culver spoke at a meeting of the Woman's Club and told of the possibility of a demonstration library for Vermilion. So ready were the people that a meeting was arranged for the next day, with practically every community sending a representative. Committees were appointed to secure the fifteen hundred dollars which was the share of the demonstration cost to be paid by the parish. It was an enthusiastic, parish-wide movement, and contributions were received from the Police Jury, the School Board and the town councils of Abbeville, Erath, Delcambre, Gueydan, Kaplan and Perry. Mrs. Lenora Vaughan, a senior citizen of Pecan Island spoke before the Police Jury, and it has been felt that her appeal did much for the library cause, for she represented a group which libraries were most eager to reach. The demonstration was opened in March 1931 in the Town Hall and a deposit of about four thousand books was sent in by the Commission. A trained librarian came to organize the twelve branch libraries throughout the parish. She remained until they were well established and volunteer custodians were trained for their work.

There was a splendid response from the reading public but at the end of the year's demonstration, Vermilion Parish found itself in the depths of the 1932 depression. Banks were closed, farmers were losing their homes through inability to pay taxes, the revenues of the parish had fallen off and the Police Jury was unwilling to call a tax election with no hope of passing the tax. The demonstration continued for eighteen months on the original appropriation of fifteen hundred dollars, while the Board of Control tried to devise ways to carry on until better times. It was with deep regret to the citizens of Vermilion Parish and to the Library Commission that so fine a demonstration should have to fail due to world wide economic conditions.

When the demonstration closed, the Board of Directors of the Abbeville Public Library met to discuss plans for reopening and trying to carry on until better times would make a parish-wide library possible. Miss Idolie Trahan allowed the books to be moved into her drug store and Mrs. M. A. Young served as custodian. About ten thousand books a year were circulated. From 1933 to 1938 this library remained open, supported by the Town Council. In 1938 there appeared to be the possibility of a second demonstration in Vermilion, but it was not until 1941 that this became a reality and seven thousand books were deposited in Vermilion, with a Bookmobile and three graduate librarians to administer it. The library was located in the Masonic Temple on State Street, using as a nucleus the shelves and fixtures of the Abbeville Public Library. This demonstration gave evidence of the marked increase in funds at the disposal of the Commission. In 1931 they received only six thousand five hundred and seventy-one dollars from the state. In 1941 the state's appropriation was ninety-seven thousand eight hundred and fifty-five dollars. W. P. A. provided assistants at the central and branch libraries, a Bookmobile and two thousand books were purchased with W. P. A. funds. Branches were established, with W. P. A. assistants in charge at Gueydan, Kaplan, Indain Bayou, Erath, Delcambre and Pecan Island. The total cost of this demonstration was eighteen thousand three hundred and seventeen dollars which included the books which remained in the parish. That one hundred thirty-eight thousand two hundred and nine books were circulated during the first year gave proof that Vermilion residents would read if given an opportunity.

When, after a year of efficient service, the tax came up for passage in February 1942 the parish was in a thriving condition. Bank deposits were up; crops had brought good prices; there was oil activity throughout the parish. So the taxpayers, despite the war, were willing to assume the small extra burden of a one mill tax. Club husbands worked hard toward the passing of the tax and, by cooperation in all sections of the parish, the tax passed and ten thousand dollars a year was assured for five years to maintain a parish library in Vermilion.

Thus, after clinging tenaciously to an idea for thirty-five years, the sponsors were rewarded by the miracle of a parish library for Vermilion. Today, by merely requesting it, at headquarters or any of the branches or the Bookmobile, the latest and best books on all subjects are made available to every citizen. Few cities have as adequate service as that provided by the cooperation of the local and commission libraries.

The names of the librarians, board members, committee workers, mayors of Abbeville, library custodians, Woman's Club presidents under whom all this took place can be found in the Historical Bulletin published by the Woman's Club at our Parish Library.

INFORMATION COMPILED BY ANNE EDWARDS BOYNTON

Report presented to the Woman's Club of Abbeville during the 1973-74 Program year by Anne Edwards Boynton