

Way Down Yonder at the Cherry Street Branch: A Short History of Evansville's Negro Library

By Michele T. Fenton

On May 31, 1912, Ms. Ethel Farquhar McCullough arrived in the southern Indiana city of Evansville. She was to begin work the next day as the director of the Evansville Public Library (now Evansville-Vanderburgh County Public Library), a position she would hold for 36 years (Goldhor, 1962). A native of Franklin, Indiana, Ms. McCullough was a 1904 graduate of the New York State Library School and had worked in several libraries in Indiana and Wisconsin before coming to Evansville (Who's Who in Library Service, 1943). Once her directorship began, Ms. McCullough had several goals in mind in making the city's library system exceptional. One such goal was the creation of a branch for Evansville's African American residents. Ms. McCullough had attended several American Library Association (ALA) Conference sessions on library services to African Americans and felt that Evansville's African American community would benefit greatly from having a library of its own. Determined to bring her goal to fruition, Ms. McCullough sent a proposal to the board of the Evansville Public Library. The board approved her proposal and in 1913 Andrew Carnegie gave a gift of \$10,000 for the branch's construction (Evansville Public Library, 1914). The library was to be built on the corner of Church and Cherry Streets (official address was 515 Cherry Street). Fannie C. Porter was chosen as the branch's first librarian ("Personals", 1914; Evansville Public Library, 1915). To prepare her for the job, Ms. Porter was sent to the Western Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library, in Louisville, Kentucky to observe and learn the makings and operations of an African American library. The Western Colored Branch was the first public library branch in the United States built solely for African Americans (Blue, 1920).

The new branch was completed in July of 1914 and was named the Cherry Street Branch Library. It began operation on November 24, 1914. At that time, the Cherry

Street Branch Library was the only public library branch north of the Ohio River that provided services solely to African Americans ("The Negro Library in Evansville, Ind.," 1915; "New Library Buildings," 1915). Also, it was the third Carnegie library built in Evansville. The dedication ceremony was held Wednesday, December 2, 1914 at McFarland Chapel (also called McFarland Baptist Church), a nearby African American church. The keynote speaker was Rachel D. Harris noted children's librarian at the Eastern Colored Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. The title of her address was "The Advantages of Colored Branch Libraries" (Harris, 1915). Henry Sanborn of the Indiana Public Library Commission and Edmund Craig of the Evansville Public Library Board were also in attendance. During the first month of operation, the Cherry Street Branch Library circulated 1,908 items and issued 494 library cards (Evansville, 1915). The collection initially had 2,800 books; however by the end of 1915 the collection had increased to 4,223 (Evansville, 1916).

In 1915, the Cherry Street Branch hired two apprentices – Nannie Mae Glover and Lillian Haydon Childress. Apprentices performed various library duties and were paid \$1 per day. Ms. McCullough introduced this idea in 1912 and continued this practice until the 1940s (Goldhor, 1962). Some apprentices attended the Indiana Public Library Commission Summer School Librarians to advance to the rank of librarian. The summer school was a six week training course in which students received instruction and experience in the practical aspects of librarianship. The training course was held on the campus of Butler College (now Butler University) and was taught by staff from the public library commission and the Indiana State Library. College Residence, a woman's dormitory, served as housing for the students. Upon successful completion of the course, students were awarded a certificate, enabling them

to gain employment as librarians ("Indiana," 1915; "Indiana Commission Summer School," 1915; "Indiana Summer School for Librarians," 1920).



Lillian Haydon Childress Hall

In June of 1915, the Evansville Public Library sent Lillian Haydon Childress to the Indiana Public Library Commission's Summer School (Evansville Public Library, 1916). A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Ms. Childress was the summer school's first African American student (NAACP, 1915). The fact that she was admitted to the summer school meant there were no racial restrictions in who was accepted unlike in other library schools, especially those in the Southern States. After six weeks of coursework, Ms. Childress graduated on July 24, 1915 ("Summer School 1915," 1915), and was appointed the new Cherry Street branch manager by Ms. McCullough (Fannie Porter resigned in April 1915) (Evansville Public Library, 1916).

During her tenure at Cherry Street, Ms. Childress and her staff worked very hard to provide the best service possible for library's patrons. However, service was more than just providing books and answering reference questions. It included reaching out to the community and helping those in need. Every year, the branch held a Christmas party to help the poor children of the neighborhood:

Through the generosity of our various friends we succeeded in raising fifty-seven dollars and eighty-seven cents. After the funds had been raised, 150 initiations were issued to our party, which was held December twenty-fourth. ... A most excellent program was rendered by the children of Governor and Third venue schools under the direction of Mr. M. C. Bryant and Miss Chinn. After the program each little one sat with sparkling eyes and a happy heart watching the beautifully lighted tree which touched the ceiling, and anxiously awaiting the time to come for him to receive his presents. Each girl was given a cap, mittens, doll and a bag of candy, orange and cracker-jack; the boys, hockey caps, stockings, machine guns, a bag of candy, orange and cracker-jack. After receiving

all that Santa had for them they left the library quite happy. – Lillian Childress, Cherry Street Branch Manager. (Evansville Public Library, 1919)

The Cherry Street staff started several clubs for its young patrons, and reached out to the city's black schools (Evansville's schools were segregated at the time) by inviting the teachers to visit the branch ("News of Indiana Libraries," 1919). In addition, the Cherry Street Branch provided meeting space for various organizations in Evansville such as the NAACP, the Lyceum Literary Society, the Christian Science Society, and the P.T.A. The Cherry Street Branch also hosted the Indiana Library Association's District "I" Meeting, January 26 and 23, 1917 (McKay, 1917). In 1916 the Cherry Street Branch received a gift in the form of the American Flag from the Good Citizen's League of Evansville (Evansville Public Library, 1917). During World War I, the staff of the Cherry Street Branch showed support for African American troops by establishing the Outlook War Unit. This group was responsible for sending Christmas gifts to bases at Yuma and Nogales, Arizona. The staff also participated in the War Chest Fund by purchasing liberty bonds and war saving stamps.

In 1921, Lillian Childress resigned from the Cherry Street Branch to manage the Paul Laurence Dunbar Branch of the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library (Downey, 1991; "Personals," 1921; "News from the Field," 1922; "Among Librarians," 1921). In 1927, Ms. Childress became the first head librarian at Crispus Attucks High School, an all-black high school in Indianapolis (Warren, 1998; O'Neill & Haggady, 1928; "Personals," 1928; "News of Indiana Libraries," 1928). Two years later, she married John Wesley Hall. Lillian Haydon Childress Hall died April 23, 1958 and is buried at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis (Jones, n.d.; "Mrs. Hall, Ex-Attucks Librarian Succumbs," 1958; "Necrology," 1958).

In 1922, the Evansville Public Library appointed Sara Etta Robinson Proctor as the new librarian at Cherry Street. Ms. Proctor was a graduate of the Indiana Public Library Commission Summer School, receiving her certificate in 1921 ("Summer School Students," 1921). That same year, Anna Cowen Buckner was hired as an assistant at the Cherry Street Branch ("Personals," 1922). The former school teacher was the wife of Dr. George Washington Buckner. Dr. Buckner, a graduate of the Indiana State Normal School (now Indiana State University), had served as the U.S. Diplomat

to Liberia (appointed by President Woodrow Wilson), and was a physician in Indianapolis before practicing in Evansville. He also helped found the Cherry Street Black YMCA and had a column in the *Indiana Democrat* called "Colored Folks" (Barbinich, 2008; Ksander, 2009).

Also in 1922, at the ALA Annual Conference in Detroit, the Work with Negroes Round Table convened for the first time. During the round table, Ms. McCullough presented her paper, "Training of Negro Workers", and had this to say about the Cherry Street Library:

Evansville's Negro branch, the first of its kind north of the Ohio River, was organized eight years ago.... The trained Negro librarian gives very acceptable service to her own people. Four colored apprentices have been graduated, sometimes with the regular class, sometimes by special training. Certificates are issued to them.

We have a very fine collection. A great effort has been made to buy everything in print on the Negro question that is not too old or too rabid. We also specialized on books written by Negroes. No collection in the city has been so carefully selected. (Rose, 1922)

In July 1925, Ms. Proctor helped plan and promote Evansville's Boys' Week ("Boys' Week in Evansville", 1925). Boys' Week included a parade on Main Street, book displays, and story hours at several of the library branches including Cherry Street. A member of ALA, Ms. Proctor remained at Cherry Street until her death in 1926 ("Necrology", 1927; "Personals", 1927).

In December of 1929, the Cherry Street Branch celebrated its fifteenth anniversary. Othella Roberts was the branch manager at the time. Guests at the celebration included Sallie Wyatt Stewart, an Evansville teacher and Mary McLeod Bethune's successor as president of the National Association of Colored Women; Edward L. Craig of the library board; W. E. Best, principal of the Lincoln High School, and W.A. Gaines. Ethel McCullough gave a talk and students from Lincoln High School performed several musical numbers ("News Notes from Indiana Libraries," 1929).

During its tenure, the Cherry Street Branch was fortunate to have capable and competent librarians. Although several of the librarians at Cherry Street Branch were

graduates of the Indiana Public Library Commission Summer School for Librarians, the branch also had the honor of hiring graduates of the Hampton Institute Library School, the first library school for African Americans (Campbell, 2000). These graduates included Martha Roney, Judith Davis, and Minnie B. Slade ("News Notes," 1939; "News Notes from Indiana Libraries," 1941; "News Notes," 1941). Minnie B. Slade (later Minnie B. Slade Bishop), a 1939 graduate of the Hampton Institute Library School, was the manager of the Cherry Street Branch of the Evansville Public Library from 1939-1940. After leaving Evansville, she worked at Arkansas State College. In 1943, Ms. Slade accepted a librarian position in Mobile, Alabama at the Bishop State Community College (formerly Alabama State College-Mobile). She later married Dr. Sanford Bishop, the first president of Bishop State Community College, and gave birth to a son, Rep. Sanford Bishop, Jr. of the U.S. House of the Representatives. The Minnie Slade Bishop Library of the Bishop State Community College is named for her (Campbell, 2000; "Congressman Sanford Bishop.")

As the years went by the Cherry Street Branch continued providing excellent service. However, changes were afoot that would negatively impact the branch's future. During World War II, the Evansville Public Library revised its policies and allowed African Americans access to all of the system's branches (Goldhor, 1962). Although this was good news for patrons, it was bad news for the Cherry Street Branch. The new policy caused a decline in the use of the branch's services leading to its closure in 1955. Bernice Hendricks was the branch's last manager.

After the Cherry Street Branch closed, the building was sold to and used by the Buffalo Trace Boy Scout Council. The money from the building's sale was used to purchase a bookmobile for the Evansville Public Library (Goldhor, 1962). In 1969, the boy scouts left and the building became the property of Wellborn Baptist Hospital. Sadly, the library was torn down to make way for the hospital's expansion in the early 1970s (Atherton, 2008). Although the Cherry Street Branch is no longer in existence, the history and legacy the library left behind still lives on.

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About the Author

Michele T. Fenton is a catalog librarian at the Indiana State Library. She holds an MLIS from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and is a member of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

Michele T. Fenton
Librarian II/Cataloger
Indiana State Library
315 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
317-232-3685
mfenton@library.in.gov