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ABSTRACT

The Black Heritage Public Library in Findlay, Ohio was begun by Nina Parker in 1981 to fill the gaps of black representation in American history and literature. The mission of one woman to counter the biased representation in local schools and present African-American history as a crucial piece of American history previously denied to all Americans, black and white, has developed into a successful, community-supported, grass roots project. This paper examines the social environment that created a need for such a library and presents the resulting philosophy upon which the library was founded. Utilizing a combination of the historical research method and case study, this paper chronicles the library's history from its inception until 1996, describing its collections, programs, and policies. The library has been instrumental in encouraging an interest in African-American history and appreciation for African-American culture in the local population and shows signs of influencing future generations. The library's accomplishments include: increased collection size and scope of African-American and Caribbean materials; increased number of patrons and patrons from across the state; educators invited library staff to speak in their classes and assigned reports to be researched at the library; the public library sent referrals to the library; and, more generally, the Black Heritage Public Library positively influenced attitudes and promoted understanding. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/SWC)

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REFUSING TO DEFER THE DREAM: A HISTORY OF THE BLACK HERITAGE PUBLIC LIBRARY, FINDLAY, OHIO

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the
Kent State School of Library Science
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Kathryn L. Venditti

May, 1996

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
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ABSTRACT

The Black Heritage Public Library is one woman's response to the biased American history she saw being taught in the local schools. Her mission to counter that ignorance developed into a successful, community-supported, grass roots project in Findlay, Ohio. The paper examines the social environment that created a need for such a library and presents the resulting philosophy upon which the library was founded.

Utilizing a combination of the historical research method and case study, this account chronicles the library from its inception until 1996. The library's collections, programs and policies are introduced. The paper concludes that the library has been instrumental in encouraging an interest in African-American history and appreciation for African-American culture in the local population and shows signs of influencing future generations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world and it stands in danger of extermination." The words of African-American historian, Carter Woodson, are displayed at the Hallie Q. Brown Black Memorial Library at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio (Hamilton 1987, 43) . They remind us that history is not a fixed reality but a selective construction. It is selectively reported, selectively organized, selectively disseminated and selectively preserved, often to the benefit of the dominant class and the detriment of the subordinate class. Whether the manipulation of our history is a subconscious by-product of the existing culture or an intentional tool of oppression, it can be used to justify discrimination or silence entire races of people, putting them in "danger of extermination."

Though we have seen great strides in racial civil rights over the last three decades, subtle forms of racism still perpetuate discriminatory practices. Multiculturalism challenges the existing standards that prevent minority groups from being treated equally, allowing voices to be heard. Demographics show

that the ratio of white to non-whites is shifting and it becomes increasingly important that differences be acknowledged, accepted and respected. The library, as an educational force and historical preservationist, is positioned to play an integral role in influencing a transition to an inclusive society where, rather than facing historical extermination, all cultures can be valued as unique, contributing members.

The American library profession's position on racial issues has evolved gradually, progressing from a history of racial segregation (Du Mont 1986) to its current commitment to equality in service and accessibility. Advances have been seen in increased equal opportunities in library employment, adaptations to meet the needs of diverse populations of patrons, and coalition with other community groups working on related issues.

However, institutional change comes slowly. In spite of good intentions and a history of service ideals, the library is still an institution firmly enmeshed in the fabric of politics and economics. Libraries are shaped by the culture they serve and need to balance their own survival with their goal of information equality. It is also difficult to keep up with the changing demographics that deflate the proportional value of any gains in equal employment practices, black-oriented acquisitions or programming. While some issues appear resolved and certain libraries have successfully responded to the need for diversity, progress is discouragingly slow in other areas.

In 1981, a young black woman in Findlay, Ohio, decided she could not afford to wait for a fair representation of her culture in her school or public library. Her young nephew, the only black child in his classroom, had been subjected to ridicule after his class viewed a movie portraying black Africans as primitive savages. Realizing that institutional change would be too slow to respond to the needs of her nephew and his generation, Nina Parker began planning a library that would fill the gaps of black representation in history and literature. Her goals were to positively reinforce the identity of children, like her nephew, and to create an opportunity for everyone, both white and black, to know their shared history. With an overwhelming vision, but very little money, Parker opened the Black Heritage Public Library in a borrowed room.

Today, the library has grown into its own facility. In addition to providing a well-rounded collection of African-American and Caribbean materials, it also showcases artifacts, and conducts an intensive outreach program. It has become a vital part of the entire town of Findlay due to the support of library volunteers, the efforts of its governing board and, most of all, the sheer determination of Nina Parker. It seems fitting that the Black Heritage Public Library has adopted its motto from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent questions is, 'What are you doing for others?'" (BSLA promotional brochure).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to piece together a chronology of the development of the Black Heritage Public Library in Findlay, Ohio as it developed from the isolated vision of one woman to a successful component of an entire community. In its progression, this history should allow for another perspective of the social potential of libraries, and it is hoped that such an analysis will place the library within the cultural context of its era.

In addition, the study may challenge some of the existing priorities and values that are used to justify resistance to cultural diversity, and may suggest fresh approaches to dealing with multicultural issues.

Definition of Terms

Black

- "black" is the racial marker used extensively by the Black Heritage Public Library and is used interchangeably with African-American for the purposes of this paper

Public library

- the use of the marker/term "public" by this particular library denotes its lending and programming policies and does not imply public funding.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited by relying on primary and secondary sources related only to the Black Heritage Public Library in Findlay, Ohio. Comparisons with and to the Findlay public library and school system are based solely on the perceptions of those consulted and may reflect their bias, rather than being statistically accurate.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature concerning the relationship between libraries and the African-American population focuses primarily on the history of library service to blacks and the ongoing assessment of current multicultural issues. The literature reveals little evidence of other contemporary individuals who are sidestepping institutional entanglement by taking a grass roots approach, although, historically, it does suggest that library service to blacks was often initiated by individuals working outside the mainstream.

Dan Lee wrote about the development of the Faith Cabin Libraries which made book collections available to rural black communities in Georgia and South Carolina from 1932 to 1975 (Lee 1991). He investigated their growth, sources of support and the attitudes of the professional library agencies during that era.

The Faith Cabin Libraries were initiated and maintained by a white textile worker, Willie Lee Buffington of Saluda, South Carolina, who was appalled at the absence of books when he attended the dedication of a new school being run by his friend, black school teacher Euriah Simpkins. Buffington wrote to five potential patrons requesting donations of books. When his campaign resulted in

more books than the small school could hold, Buffington, with the help of the community, built a log cabin to house the collection. That first Faith Cabin Library was dedicated on December 31, 1932. Word of mouth and the national media spread the word about the project and soon others were inspired to send more books. Church groups, schools, service organizations and universities all became interested and adopted the project. Later that year, Buffington was able to open a second location in a community-built log cabin at another black school. By 1942, twenty-nine Faith Cabin Libraries were established in other rural black communities, serving children and adults alike, until 1975, when the need for independent black libraries was gradually diminishing, as the national library profession finally took a stand on integration.

Rosemary Ruhig Du Mont noted that the key changes in library integration were responses to enforced legislation and agitation by individuals, rather than an organized commitment from the library profession (Dumont 1986). By chronicling the profession's position on the integration of southern libraries from the early 1900s, she revealed the conflicted stance of the American Library Association toward the status of black librarians and library service to blacks. Although many library professionals indicated good intentions, the ALA, as an organization, failed to take a leadership position on library school or library integration .

When libraries were first built in the South in 1895, they were intended to serve only white people. It wasn't until 1903 that library service to a black community first became available at the Cossit Library in Memphis. By 1935,

there were only ninety-four libraries serving blacks in the thirteen southern states and those segregated libraries usually received only the only dregs of funding, resulting in inferior collections (Du Mont 1986). Segregation also dictated that black librarians could only be educated at black schools and were expected to work in black libraries.

At the 1936 ALA convention in Richmond, Virginia, black delegates were segregated in meeting halls, could not attend meetings where meals were served, nor stay in the same hotel as the other delegates. Later that year, in response to the resulting protest, the ALA passed a resolution stating that conventions would only be held where all members could be treated equally. Yet, by 1945, retiring ALA president Althea Warren admitted that, even in the North, hotel restrictions made it impossible for the ALA to live up to its "unattainable principles" (Du Mont 1986, 497).

It wasn't until the civil rights movement was well under way that the ALA finally committed to an egalitarian policy. In 1961, paragraph five was added to the Library Bill of Rights, stating, "the rights of an individual to the use of a library should not be denied or abridged because of his race, religion, national origins or political views," but, based on a survey of southern librarians, Du Mont determined that it was federal legislation and patron action which influenced the integration of libraries, rather than ALA regulation. She concluded that further analysis of historical library service to blacks and southern liberal ideology needs

to be analyzed in order to see how it relates to contemporary library service to the American black population.

The issues of contemporary library service were the focus of the Second National Conference of African-American Librarians (Mark 1994). A recent article highlighted some of the ongoing debate from the perspective of the 700 members of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (Mark 1994). While one librarian, James Welbourn of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, predicted that diversity issues may soon become irrelevant in the wake of electronic communities, most delegates were concerned with issues such as recruiting and retaining black librarians, the need for addressing diversity in library school curricula, creative outreach programs in inner-city libraries, and well-rounded collection development.

The responsibility of building a racially diverse collection was written about in more detail by the collection development coordinator of Buffalo College, Glendora Johnson-Cooper (Johnson-Cooper 1994). In her article on Afrocentric collection building, she questioned the library selection practices that are standard in American libraries and showed that they may be proscriptive to building a collection that represents and serves minorities. She noted that, although most ethnic material is published by the small, independent presses, library policy often dictates that materials are chosen on the basis of recommendations of a limited core of popular, mainstream selection aids, such as *Choice* or *Booklist*, which only review and promote the major publishers who

cater to the economic clout of the white majority. Economic considerations often prevent small, black independent presses from complying with the delayed billing policies of mainstream libraries, or with their demands for a business/tax status.

Johnson-Cooper recommended a more flexible business policy and a serious commitment to looking outside of the mainstream to identify multicultural materials. Her article included a wide range of potential sources for the identification of multicultural materials, from African-American institutions to specific publishers, materials and relevant journals.

Many of Johnson-Cooper's concerns were covered by librarians at a two-day conference entitled "Developing Collection's for California's Emerging Majority" (Scarborough 1991). Conference attendees suggested that libraries need to commit to an overall systematic program of service to ethnic communities. They recommended that libraries develop community profiles and quantify their progress of ethnic acquisitions. In addition to identifying purchasing policy and selection standards as barriers to diversity, they noted that cataloging practices may also be an obstacle. Catalog headings, in relation to minority populations, were identified as outdated and inconsistent. It was recommended that librarians be sensitive to language in relation to ethnic peoples, improve terminology and make cataloging of newly acquired ethnic material a priority for more immediate accessibility. It was also recognized that disenfranchised peoples have often learned to view libraries as alienating, negative

representatives of a dominant white culture and creative means will need to be found in introducing new collections.

There are others who question the importance of reprioritizing our collections and curricula to represent all facets of American cultures (Smoler 1992; Folkner and Hafner 1993). Their major concern seems to arise from a conviction that dichotomy is inevitable, that the inclusion of multicultural material naturally precludes the inclusion of traditional material. Narrowed to the perspective of the library profession, Folkner and Hafner saw the debate as an example of the necessary tenuous balance between the library's commitment to serve its public and its need to defend the existence of the library profession on the basis that certain materials are deserving of their protection. They recommended listening to both sides of the argument, while maintaining a middle ground.

However, author Virginia Hamilton warned about the inherent danger of complicity when libraries do not take a firm position. She drew an analogy between the lack of representation of blacks and the recognized dangers of the censorship of individuals. She uses the example of African-American leader W.E.B. DuBois who was blacklisted by the government during the McCarthy era. His writings were either destroyed, or, in the case of Atlanta University, pulled from the library shelves and hidden to avoid destruction. Although Du Bois was acquitted, his lack of representation made him invisible to the world; in his words, "I lost my leadership of my race...The colored children ceased to hear my name"

(Hamilton 1987, 44). Hamilton used examples from the McCarthy era to show how silencing can lead to what Carter Woodson saw as the “extermination” of a race. Hamilton made the point that exposure to a wide variety of views and cultures does not dilute a society, but, rather, enriches everybody. Well-known educator Dr. Alvin Poussaint emphasized the same point when he spoke at the Library of Congress, “ The benefit of being sensitive to multiculturalism is an ability to put yourself in another’s shoes. When an effort is made to understand other cultures, then we can better understand ourselves” (Sudsreth 1993, 83).

Overall, the literature revealed that African-American interests have historically been underrepresented in the library field. Specific improvements have been identified and several courses of action have been offered.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The researcher intends to investigate the Black Heritage Public Library using the methodology of a historical case study. The foundation of the study will be constructed using information collected through informal conversations with the director and the head librarian of the library, as well as from the analysis of other primary sources such as library records, minutes of board meetings, annual reports, newsletters, public relations announcements and newspaper coverage.

Directories of African-American cultural centers and tourist information will be utilized as secondary sources to reinforce the overall picture of the library.

In addition, the researcher intends to visit the library, with the knowledge of its staff, in order to observe the collections, programs, patron use, and local demographics. The observation should be useful in revealing any discrepancies with the reports and in discovering information that has not been revealed through documents or conversations.

It is intended that the combination of these several different data collection strategies will develop a comprehensive history of the Black Heritage Public Library, from its inception to the present time.

CHAPTER FOUR ANALYSIS OF DATA

Findlay is a mid-sized town set in the flat fields of northwest Ohio. Supported by diversified industry, the community is also home to the University of Findlay, a conservative school established by the Churches of God. The population of Findlay is predominately white and middle class. In recent years, the Asian population has increased slightly as a result of cooperative Japanese-American efforts in local industry. Because Findlay was an early haven on the underground railroad, African-Americans have long been rooted in the community, yet, account for less than two percent of the current population. There are few identifiable black neighborhoods in Findlay, nor does one find a cohesive black community outside the church, as one might find in larger cities.

Though Findlay has remained essentially unscathed by the large-scale racial conflict found elsewhere that does not mean that African-Americans have always received unbiased treatment. The town has a history that parallels the majority of mid-America following W.W.II. Local community groups had to organize to dismantle discriminatory housing practices after the Civil Rights Commission was established in 1964. It has been contended that in altercations among integrated gatherings in Findlay, there has been a tendency for police to consider African-Americans suspect first, even without incriminating evidence. "As long as you are not a trouble-maker, the city will tolerate you," summarized a

local African-American man, “but they can get rid of you if they want to” (Jokinen 1996 27 February 2[C]).

When Nina Parker’s young nephew came home with his account of being ridiculed within Findlay’s school system, the incident felt painfully familiar to her. As one of the few African-American students in her elementary school, she had to learn to contend with derisive racial name-calling on a daily basis, but one specific incident clearly stands out in her memory. She remembers feeling confused and humiliated when her teacher explained to her fifth grade class that “all black adults are dangerous because they carry guns to work.” Parker recalls, “The thing that hurt the most was that she said all black adults and I thought, ‘she means my parents, too.’ The way she impacted, not just me, but all the white students in the class, still bothers me” (Kleinhenz 1994, 1[B]).

When she was in school during the sixties and seventies, the only mention of African-Americans was a few pages about slavery in the history books. Parker recalls that there was a minimal amount of discussion in school when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, but many of her classmates echoed the sentiments of relief expressed by some local adults (Joniken 1996, 1[A]).

Parker grew up to become an auditor for the state of Ohio, but she remained concerned about the perpetuation of racial bias in the school curriculum. She imagined creating a resource center that could counter the ignorance with knowledge, a library to fill in the gaps with exposure to the vast achievements of African-Americans. In the poem “Dream Deferred,” African-American poet Langston Hughes cautions his audience that there can be

potentially hazardous consequences if dreams are postponed (Adoff 1973, 76).

Parker's nephew's experience made it clear that she could wait no longer. It was time to take action, to turn her dream of an African-American library into a reality.

In late 1981, Parker approached her family, friends, and church for assistance in developing the library. A persistent, persuasive woman, she eventually obtained the support she desired, but, in the beginning, even those closest to her had their doubts about the practicality of her proposed project. "I thought it was a good idea," her husband, Darnell Parker, noted, "However, there are so few blacks in the community, I didn't think it would work" (Sherard 1).

Besides her husband, early supporters included her mother, Stella Sherard; close friend, Nannette Griffith; her sister, Tracie M. Sherard; her pastor, Dolphus Smith, from the Mason Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and members of the church's Stewardess Board. By early 1982 the Mason Chapel A.M.E. Black Heritage Public Library officially opened in a borrowed classroom in the church building at 845 Liberty Street, Findlay (Sherard 1,2).

When Parker was a child her mother had presented her with the book, *Great Negroes, Past and Present*. That book became the seed from which the collection grew. The original collection consisted of a mere five books and was available only during church hours. That first year the library was basically a church-supported project.

At first, the library served only a limited audience, but it soon became obvious that the library was filling a desperate need and, gradually, it began to attract more attention. Early influential visitors included State Representative

John Stozich and A.M.E. Bishop Richard Hildebrand (Sherard). “ It became such a big to-do within the community,” Parker recalls, “People were always calling, even though we didn’t publicize” (Kleinhenz 1994 1[A]).

In 1983 Parker organized the Black Studies and Library Association, a non-profit, state-chartered, governing organization. A board of twenty members, drawn from diverse segments of the community, met once a month to organize cultural events and navigate a course for the library’s growth. Once the organization was established, the library became autonomous from the church, and condensed its name to the Black Heritage Public Library.

With no consistent source of funding, the BSLA earnestly began to search for alternative sources of revenues. In 1984, it received a \$2,500 start-up grant for the purchase of materials through the Cleveland Foundation. The foundation representative, Steve Minter, took a special interest in the project, providing invaluable advice on setting up the library and continuing support throughout the years.

Growing interest and continued contributions helped to increase the collection to the point where it outgrew its borrowed quarters. In the summer of 1987, the BSLA moved the library down the street to a rented facility in the lower level of an apartment building at 839 Liberty Street. With over one thousand square feet, the library was able to more adequately serve the needs and concerns of library patrons (Mills 1992, 10[C]). The new library had three hundred books, audio-visual materials, and the beginnings of a collection of

African, Caribbean, and African-American artifacts, besides an exhibit on loan from the Smithsonian Institution (Sherard 3).

By the early nineties, it was becoming all too apparent that the collection was again outgrowing the library's available space. In 1992 the BSLA set a goal to raise ten thousand dollars towards the purchase of a new building. The association organized fund-raising events and solicited local businesses and individuals. The generous assistance of Findlay businessman, John Sausser, of Sausser Steel, was especially invaluable in helping the library meet its objective. By the end of the second year, the building campaign had exceeded the original goal by two thousand dollars and the library was able to look for a new location.

On 15 June 1994, the BSLA purchased real estate from Findlay Congregation, Jehovah's Witnesses Church. The property is at 817 Harmon Street, Findlay, part of section 7, Marion Township, Hancock County, Ohio (Courier 1994). All summer long, the BSLA worked toward transforming the former church building into a library and resource center. Hand-made, heavy oak bookcases were commissioned, volunteers painted walls and the BSLA began to transfer the collection to its new home. The Black Heritage Public Library officially opened to the public with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on 17 September 1994 (Courier 1994). The latest incarnation of the Black Heritage Public Library is situated on one acre of property on a quiet, tree-lined street in a predominately white, working-class residential neighborhood. The building is handicapped-accessible and has its own parking lot. With over two thousand square feet, double the previous space, the library contains a lobby, an office, restrooms, a

small gift shop area, and a large central room to house the collections, with a raised stage area for special programs at the far end of the room. The library is open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from four p.m. to eight p.m., on Saturdays, and by appointment.

The BSLA's most recent mission statement heads their newsletter: "to enhance public awareness and appreciation of the contributions, history and culture of African-Americans. We believe that knowledge is the key to understanding, sensitivity, and racial unity" (Voice 1996,1). Parker expands on the declaration by stressing, "We want to promote racial harmony and peace in the community through the library and let people come in to see how the mistruths and stereotypes they grew up with about black people are untrue" (Claffey 1994 1[A]). The library has kept these goals in mind as it has increased its collection and expanded outreach programs. The new facility is used for research, performing arts, seminars, and classes concerning black history and cultural diversity, with a particular emphasis on educating children. The multiple missions of the library are reflected in the variety of its expanding collections and programs.

The library's collection of books has drastically increased from the original five donated books to over 1,300 books. Although the library is still grateful for the donation of used books, currently two-thirds of acquisitions are new purchases, while others are donated as gift memorials. The anticipated budget for new material in 1996 is approximately nine thousand dollars. New materials are purchased from several area bookstores that offer the library a small

discount. The library staff relies on catalogs, booklists, patron recommendations, mainstream reviews, and advertising literature as the predominant selection tools.

Maintenance and access were much more manageable when the collection was smaller, however, the library is finding it necessary to consider more standardized methods of organization as the collection increases. In 1996 the library began the process of creating a shelf list by entering bibliographical data into a Macintosh computer, utilizing a program created through the volunteer efforts of a local professional librarian. At present, the Black Heritage Public Library has no firm cataloging nor classification system. Fiction material is alphabetically arranged by author's last name and non-fiction is divided and shelved according to subject headings. While the material appears arbitrarily organized, the library staff has developed the uncanny ability to immediately zero in on a requested title.

The children's collection is the heart of the library. It, too, is arranged in a manner similar to the adult collection. In keeping with two key elements of the library's mission, to increase exposure to black history and to give children an opportunity to grow up with a multi-cultural perspective, a great portion of the children's section is devoted to books on African-American history, written at an elementary school level. The library also maintains a sizable collection of multi-cultural picture books, fiction books for grades K-6, educational game sets, puzzles, and puppets to help children learn about influential African-Americans.

In addition to books, the library subscribes to approximately twenty different periodicals for all age groups and maintains a small audio-visual

collection, including audio tapes of jazz and blues. The video collection of approximately one hundred selections contains early Fat Albert cartoons, contemporary commercial films by young black directors, and documentaries about black innovators and the civil rights movement. Audio-visual equipment includes a television, a video camera and player.

Because the materials have been collected for the purpose of presenting a balanced perspective of African-American history and culture, negative images are represented in the collection, as well as positive ones (Jokinen 1996). Although the library grew out of the environment of a Christian church, the staff has made an effort to collect relevant material on Islam, indigenous African beliefs, and other religions.

With the exception of a few non-circulating reference books, most of the periodicals and books may be borrowed by library members in two week increments. Membership is open to all individuals over the age of seven and entails only filling out a brief application. Borrowing privileges are limited to five books per person at a time. Patrons may borrow up to three audio or video cassettes for a one week period, by depositing a one dollar fee per item, which is refundable upon the item's return. Materials returned late incur a fine calculated by material type and the number of overdue days (BSLA Rules and Regulations).

In addition to borrowing privileges, the library membership offers a 10 percent discount on books ordered through the library, a discount on gift shop items, eligibility for an undergraduate scholarship sponsored by the library, a

subscription to the library's quarterly newsletter, and a "heritage chair" nameplate to encourage a sense of "ownership" in the library (BSLA Membership Benefits).

The diversity represented in the Black Heritage Public Library's extensive collection of African, Caribbean and African-American artwork and artifacts explodes any narrow preconceptions which might be used to stereotype African-American culture. Pertinent descriptive information on each of the 267 items is recorded in a file card index. Most of the displayed material has been donated or brought back from member's trips to Africa and the Caribbean, each piece with its own story to tell. Various types of artwork line the walls including intriguing photographs of past generations of African-Americans, educational posters, distinctive textiles, paintings and sketches, both originals and reproductions. A recent donated acquisition is a signed, numbered print, "Georgia Cotton Pickers" by African-American artist, Thomas H. Benton (BSLA, *Voice* 1996). Artists Steve Rader, J. Holiday, B. Romick and Marcia Taylor are represented, as well.

Artifactual materials are arranged in several display cases. Two long cases, set end-to-end, contain small items of African and Caribbean origin; jewelry from Senegal and Kenya, small instruments, decorative wooden sculpture, soapstone carvings, fertility dolls, hand-woven basketry, postcards and other textual artifacts. A tall, bow-front case, angled in a corner of the room, displays African-American artifacts such as dolls, ceramics and rubber hand puppets manufactured by Creative Playthings in the nineteen-fifties. Larger items, clustered in small groups, encircle the perimeter of the central room. A weathered ottoman of hand-tooled leather leans against an intricately-carved

wooden chair from Haiti. A large oil painting of Malcolm X. looks out over the shoulder of a dressmaker's mannequin, dressed in colorful African textiles. One staff favorite is an antique love seat, re-upholstered with a rich kente cloth fabric of vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red. Across the room a dated, American yard sculpture squats on the floor and a carved mask rests against a wall.

The library also owns a unique collection of African-American themed U.S. stamps, most stamped with a first day of issue postmark. Donated by the founder, Nina Parker, the collection contains approximately forty-five commemorative stamps honoring influential African-American citizens, landmarks, or events. The earliest item in the collection dates back to 1940. There are representative stamps from each subsequent decade, usually printed every February for Black History Month.

The library considers one particular exhibit to be the jewel in its crown. In 1986, the Smithsonian Institution Air and Space Museum offered the library the indefinite loan of a multi-media exhibition which highlights the accomplishments of African-Americans in the field of aeronautics. Titled "Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation," the exhibit of forty-nine photographic panels chronicles the contributions and progress of black aviators, from the flights of barnstormer Bessie Coleman in the early 1920s, to the far-reaching achievements of contemporary professionals in the space program. There is a special emphasis on the Tuskegee Airmen who defiantly overturned the dominant social presumptions about African-American abilities. Their victorious contributions marked a turning point in the military and aviation history of the United States

(SITES 1986). Not only is "Black Wings" an integral element of the library's collection, it has been indispensable in library outreach. The exhibit has brought the library opportunities to network with groups and individuals who would normally be unaware of the library's existence. On one such occasion, the library joined with the Findlay Chamber of Commerce for a special day to honor military contributions, culminating with a visit with some of the original Tuskegee Airmen. Although there is no charge to borrow the "Black Wings" exhibit, the library does request an honorarium in return.

The homogeneity of Findlay's population, coupled with the general unfamiliarity with African-American history, could have created restrictive barriers to the library's expansion, and, more significantly, to its potential influence in the community. However, besides developing its collections and exhibits, the Black Heritage Public Library also produced an extensive schedule of outreach programs. Continually alert to any possible opening in the community where it might secure a foothold, the staff creates numerous programs tailored to each individual audience. Regardless of the racial identity of an audience, whether it is made up of children or adults, a few individuals or a crowd, the BSLA rarely misses an opportunity to communicate its message. They plan fund-raising events, educational projects, and recreational programs, presented both in the library and out in the community.

There are several events that appear on the library's calendar annually, beginning with a month-long program to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in January. The commemoration typically involves musical performances, poetry

readings, and special presentations, such as a lecture given by local professor Joyce Watford, in 1993, who spoke to the audience as she envisioned Dr. King would be speaking to them, were he still alive. (Courier 1993).

Black History is the theme for February, when the library hosts programs that typically include readings, presentations and special events. Mike Pruitt, a local businessman and retired professional football player, was a guest speaker one year, sharing how his success was influenced by his knowledge of black history (Lackey 1993).

The BSLA initiated its first annual Black Achievement Career Day on 30 May 1992, when a panel of African-American guest speakers shared their???? career experiences with the audience (BSLA 1992). The BSLA also sponsors field trips every year, traveling to destinations relative to black history, such as the Wilberforce African-American Museum or local stops on the underground railroad.

Each October since 1986, Black Studies Library Association has given an Appreciation Banquet to honor the valued individuals who contribute to the library throughout the year. Generally, the BSLA has tried to alternate the banquet program between a guest speaker and a program in subsequent years, for example, the late Carl B. Stokes spoke at one banquet, and a Columbus actress presented a dramatization of Harriet Tubman at another. The annual banquet is normally the fund-raising event that brings in the greatest portion of money.

The BSLA has organized other community projects that serve the dual role of fund-raising and promoting African-American culture. In 1995 the BSLA had a

"BBQ Rib and Chicken Fest" which so far exceeded its expectations, it is scheduled to become an annual event. Not only did the event contribute to their revenue, but it provided an opportunity to draw the attention of the general public to the library in an innocuous manner. Other successful fund-raisers were a "Jazz and Blues Festival," in 1995, and a style show featuring contemporary clothing created from African textiles, presented in conjunction with an African-American art exhibit at the University of Findlay. Every single event, whether billed as such or not, is viewed as a potential source of contributions. All press releases and event programs make it clear that the library welcomes donations of time, money, books and African-American artifacts.

On-going library programs center around presenting the library, its collections and philosophy to audiences as diverse as the Association of University Women to a Mennonite youth group. The programs incorporate lectures, discussion groups, and slide presentations. The library staff is always eager to conduct library tours but, just as often, BSLA volunteers will give presentations about the library and its collections out in the community. Frequently the library has loaned display materials such as jewelry from Kenya or posters and artwork.

While general programming at the Black Heritage Public Library is extensive, the main focus of the library is the younger generation and, accordingly, the thrust of programming is aimed at children. Parker and other volunteers give presentations at local Headstart programs, Sunday schools, and the public schools in Findlay and the surrounding area. African-American culture

is introduced to youngsters through library tours, presentations and story-hours held at the library. Each August the library coordinates a free black history program for children aged five through sixteen years of age. Titled "Discovery," the three week long program includes readings, video presentations, lessons, and art appreciation. The library sponsored a black history reading contest in 1992. In another creative project, the library was one of three topics chosen for a news broadcast taped by schoolchildren, in cooperation with the Northwestern Educational Technology Foundation and WGBU-TV.

In its earliest years, the library solely functioned on donated space, materials and volunteer efforts. While the library still relies a great deal on the contributions of individuals, support for the library is increasingly derived from multiple sources including grants, corporate funding, and fundraising events. The library's start-up grant from the Cleveland Foundation was through the benefit of the L. Dale Dorney Fund. Leland Dale Dorney was a Findlay millionaire who stipulated that part of his estate be used to promote the arts and cultural diversity in Hancock County. The BSLA was the first black-based organization to receive funding from the Dorney Committee and has applied several times since then. The grants have been allocated for the purchase of materials, computers, and staffing, depending on the shifting priorities of the administrators of the trust.

Annual operating costs are derived from several sources. Corporate donations account for approximately 30 percent of the library's annual revenues and are solicited specifically for the retirement of the library's mortgage. Every winter the library conducts a letter campaign directed towards individuals whose

contributions 15 percent of the operating expenses. Another 45 percent is raised through bi-annual fund-raising events, often incorporated into other programming. The remaining annual revenues are composed of BSLA membership dues, net income from the library's small gift shop, book fines, tour donations, exhibit honorariums and miscellaneous donations (BSLA Budget).

In addition to the moneys, the library receives an immeasurable amount of donated time, materials and expertise. For most of its history the library has been exclusively staffed by volunteers. The library still depends on volunteers for assistance, house-keeping and maintenance, administrative work, and some speaking engagements.

However, by early 1996, a Dorney grant enabled the library to pay the salaries of part-time employees. Previously, the library was primarily staffed by the founder, Nina Parker, and Susan Martaus, a local professional librarian who joined the library in 1988. Martaus had been working as a librarian in an elementary school, included in Parker's territory, as a state auditor. As their paths crossed over the course of several years, they frequently discussed the Black Heritage Public Library. When Martaus decided to temporarily retire from the school system to raise a family, she chose to become the librarian at the Black Heritage Public Library on a voluntary basis. During the late eighties and throughout the nineties, the library was only open on Tuesdays and Saturdays, with Parker and Martaus covering both shifts, assisted by other volunteers. Now that the library can afford paid, part-time staffing, the hours have been extended to include Thursday evenings. Parker has been hired as the part-time Program

Outreach Director, Martaus as the part-time librarian, and a former volunteer as part-time assistant. Their corp of volunteers has also expanded over the years. As a result of a recent service obligation required for high school graduation, the library has unexpectedly benefited from teenaged helpers, especially as each school year draws to a close.

The BSLA is the governing arm of the library. Members pay annual dues of \$35, plan events, and the dispersal of funds. There are fifty members, including a twenty member board of trustees. Until 1996, Parker served as president of the board, Stella Sherard as vice-president, Martaus as secretary, and Nanette Griffith as treasurer. Since Parker and Martaus have become paid employees, they realize that alternates will have to be found in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

Given the limitations of the library budget, public relations operates on a shoestring. The library produces flyers and brochures for special programs and publishes *The Voice*, a quarterly newsletter for members. *The Voice* serves several purposes. A sample newsletter from the first quarter of 1996 recognizes recent contributors, advertises new gift shop items, presents articles about African-American inventor, Lewis Latimer, and jockey, Isaac "Ike" Murphy, and introduces a new postage stamp honoring African-American biologist Ernest E. Just.

Local newspapers consistently covered the library throughout its history, but, in the last few years, several newspaper reporters and a radio reporter have taken a special interest in promoting the library. The staff generally tries to

communicate information about the library and its services by directly contacting school principals and teachers. Parker and other members of BSLA have made an effort to network within the community, working with the Chamber of Commerce and the area arts council. Word of mouth has proven the most effective means of marketing the library. Without any deliberate effort on its part, the library has found itself promoted in Ohio travel literature, and, to the staff's surprise, has even been listed on the Internet.

The continued interest in the library encourages the BSLA members to start planning for the future. One new project will begin in the fall of 1996, when the BSLA will award undergraduate scholarships. While members will receive first consideration, the scholarship will be open to the public, and awarded on the basis of need and a demonstrated commitment to cultural diversity. Over the next five years, the BSLA would like to convince the local schools to incorporate black culture classes into the curriculum, with the library's input and support. It has also been a long-standing objective of the library to obtain the necessary funding to incorporate an African-American oral history collection.

To accommodate future programs and collections the library predicts it will have to expand. Once the immediate goal of retiring the mortgage is achieved, possibly by 1997, the library has hopes of building an addition large enough to triple the program seating to accommodate three hundred people and to include a large conference room, workshop area, and kitchen. Though the library has come a long way from the original five books in a borrowed room, the BSLA can only imagine endless possibilities for the library's future.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the years since the inception of the Black Heritage Public Library, there has been a gradual, but gratifying, nation-wide recognition of African-American history, both in public school curriculums and in the mainstream media. The national changes make it difficult to gauge the exact role the Black Heritage Public Library has played in regional progress, or to construct a full meaning from its history. The library's collection has certainly grown in size and scope. The number of people touched by the library has increased exponentially from the small core of staff to an ever-widening circle; patron records show that visits have increased from a slow trickle to an occasional surge of 160 in some months. While most early patrons were members of the one small church, the library guest book records visits from patrons across the entire state of Ohio. There has also been a noticeable change in institutional response. Now educators invite the library staff to speak in their classes and they assign black history reports with instructions to do research at the library. Even the public library has sent referrals to the Black Heritage Public Library. However, the library's true worth can not be measured with collection analysis or visitation statistics. It is of greater significance that the library has positively influenced attitudes and promoted understanding, ambiguous values that are difficult to quantify.

The BSLA's logo is a dark-skinned hand and a light-skinned hand together holding up the world, encircled with the message, "BSLA ...Working together for a better community and world." More than just a marketing trademark, the logo may be viewed as a shorthand summary of the library's success. One of the clearest missions of the library is to present African-American history as a crucial piece of American history that had been denied all Americans, black and white. A measure of the library's achievement is the continual integrated cooperation that has marked its growth, starting at the top with the team of Parker, who is African-American, and Martaus, who is white, and evidenced in the ranks of board members, volunteers, and patrons. Records of early events at the library include a racial tally, showing a relative balance of race among attendees. On the researcher's visits, there seemed to be more white patrons than African-American, which, while it may be reflective of the community demographics, is all the more remarkable given those demographics.

Almost a generation has passed since the library first opened its doors. The response from the children and young adults may be one of the greatest indicators of the library's success. Although most of the teenagers initially volunteer to fulfill a graduation requirement, several, both white and African-American, have eagerly returned on their own time. If Nina Parker has any doubts about the influence of the library, she has only to think of the young adults who have recently reintroduced themselves to her, enthusiastically sharing that they clearly remember a library presentation she made to their class when they were children.

The African-American culture is an evolving, complex and rich conglomeration, born of shifts of time and geography, and projected by the complicated dynamics of human action and reaction. While there is no singular definition of the black American experience, there are a few reoccurring themes evidenced in the African-American culture housed at the Black Heritage Public Library. African-American artists repeatedly stress the interdependence of community, the ability to find worth in that which is undervalued, and a powerful commitment to survival, as demonstrated in Langston Hughes' caution about dreams deferred.

Not only has the BSLA been instrumental in maintaining and disseminating knowledge about African-American history, but, through its own growth, it is emblematic of the African-American cultural tradition in this country. The members have been able to find worth in that which was undervalued, developing it until its value became clear to all. They've drawn not only on the existing community, but created one of their own. And, throughout it all, in spite of the realities of inadequate funds and limited validation, Parker, with the help of the dedicated BSLA, has remained committed to her vision, refusing to defer her dream of the Black Heritage Public Library.

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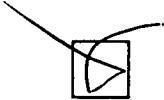


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