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Freedom's Reading: The Discovery of Two Alabama Freedom Libraries

Mike Selby

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It was the crying that woke her.

Twelve-year-old Shirley Ann McDonald had just fallen asleep when the loud wails startled her awake. They were coming from her brother Walter who, still just a baby, needed to be changed. Shirley Ann stumbled into his room, changed him, and went back to her own bed.

Seconds later, bullets crashed into Walter's room, blasting apart his tiny crib. He was unharmed. After she had changed his diaper, Shirley Ann had taken him back to her own room with her, hoping he would sleep better. His sister's concern for her baby brother unwittingly saved his life.

The McDonald home was fired upon just before midnight on Wednesday, September 1st, 1965. News accounts reported "the blasts tore through the living room wall and ledge. More blasts from a shot-gun ripped through the bedroom where Mrs. McDonald slept with her husband Leon" (Jet 6). It remains astounding no one was hurt, as all ten children of the McDonalds were home that night.

The shots came from guns wielded by "nightriders"—nocturnal terrorists officially known as the Ku Klux Klan. While this type of racial violence was not new to the citizens of Hayneville, the Civil Rights Movement had seriously increased its occurrence. Discovering Patti Mae McDonald supported the movement, she and her family had been the targets of the harassing phone calls and anonymous death threats which were typical of the time.

The attempted murder of her family on that fateful night was thought to be in retaliation for Patti Mae's insistence in housing civil rights workers. Except here the Klan had it wrong. The McDonald home didn't house any civil rights workers at all. It did, however, house something which was crucial to the Civil Rights Movement.

Patti Mae McDonald operated a "Freedom Library" out of two rooms of her modest home.

Freedom Libraries

Freedom Libraries were originally a product of 'Freedom Summer'—the voting registration campaign launched by various civil rights organizations in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. Information about these libraries has been extremely limited, so much so that their very existence remains "virtually unknown even within the American library community" (Cook 3). This changed in 2008, when Karen Cook's dissertation provided a

comprehensive and exhaustive look at Mississippi Freedom Libraries. She positively identified over 80 different ones. While reading Cook's work, I began to wonder if something similar had occurred in Alabama. After all, Alabama was ground zero during the Civil Rights Movement—"the most important piece of geography in the most important movement of our times" (Gaillard xvi). While literature about the ones in Mississippi was limited, information about ones in Alabama was and is nonexistent.

As this paper will show, I set out in April of 2013 to a.), determine if any Freedom Libraries had in fact existed in Alabama, and b.), if so, to try and get as complete a historical picture as possible of them. The results of this clearly testify to Alabama's historic practice of providing community and public library services to those in need of them.

Information Gathering

Research for this paper came from a number of sources. A request for information was sent out to 140 Civil Rights Movement participants, ones who specifically worked in the state of Alabama. (These participants were found listed on at the Civil Rights Movement Veterans' website: <http://www.crmvet.org/>). A total of 66 participants responded. This request was also made to six Civil Rights academics, all of who were kind enough to respond. Two journalists who had written extensively about the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama were also contacted, with only one replying.

Only one out of seven public libraries contacted responded, while none of the three Historically Black Colleges and Universities contacted replied. Somewhat in categories of their own, the State Library of Louisiana, the Special Library Association, the Alabama Library Association, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute all replied to information requests.

Peter Kellman and Willie James MacDonald were kind enough to provide oral histories. As both were intimately involved in the operation of respective Alabama Freedom Libraries, the interviews they gave remain invaluable.

Numerous books, articles, newspapers, published and unpublished dissertations and primary source documents were also consulted (see bibliography).

Two Freedom Libraries were positively identified as having existed in Alabama during the summer of 1965.

Alabama Libraries

The state of Alabama had few libraries in the 19th century, a fact that did not change during the first part of the 20th century. In his historical look at Alabama library development, Kenneth R. Johnson found the state to have “many conditions which were not conducive to a system of good libraries” (120). In fact, even by 1920 “no library was established with tax revenue or by government officials” (122). A survey conducted by the state department in 1915 concluded “that the majority of Alabamians had no library at all” (125).

Reasons for the state’s delayed development in library service are varied, but most point towards the socioeconomic conditions of Alabama’s residents. Annabel K. Stephens aptly concluded that “due to conditions of extensive poverty, illiteracy and poor education, and the rural nature of most of its communities, the majority of Alabama libraries were established much later than those in other parts of the country” (28). Johnson’s research supports this, finding “extensive poverty led many persons to prefer low taxes rather than libraries” (120). These conditions, according to Johnson, created a large number of citizens who “possessed little appreciation of the value and pleasure to be derived from reading,” creating a “tradition that placed little value on books” (120).

What Johnson missed and Stephens didn’t was—although Alabama clearly lacked any government-run or tax funded public libraries—Alabama had a rich history of private citizens, women’s clubs, and community organizations which provided public library services. Stephens’ study of 116 of such libraries clearly illustrated just “how highly motivated many of Alabama’s citizens were to have a place in their communities where people could come to read, obtain materials for home reading, and meet together to discuss important issues” (34). The two Freedom Libraries which appeared in 1965 should be seen not as aberrations, but part of a long tradition of “Alabama citizens’ dedication to creating and maintaining community libraries” (28).

All of the historic libraries mentioned above shared one unmistakable feature in their services: African Americans were barred from using them.

As Stephen Cresswell noted, when “southern towns and cities began to build public libraries in large numbers...the new libraries and did not segregate Blacks—they excluded them altogether” (557). While an extensive look at the segregated practices in the libraries of Alabama are beyond this paper, a few points should be made to better illustrate the need for the Freedom Libraries.

The Supreme Court had supported the southern states separate but equal practice since 1890. In Alabama, “libraries were no more equal than other segregated institutions” (Graham 2). Eliza Atkins Gleason found equality of library service to be “a dishonest farce,” finding the few libraries created for African Americans to be “scattered, rundown, understaffed and under stocked with books” (566).

Library Associations

Particularly culpable in this cruel practice was the American Library Association and the Alabama Library Association. In *The Ugly Side of Librarianship*, Klaus Musmann noted the amount of resources and effort put into serving new immigrants to the United States, including the creation of a specific round table to work with the foreign born. African Americans, he stated, were “not worthy of the attention of a national organization of librarians” (79). Believing the denial of service to African Americans was a local matter, the leadership of the ALA continued to fall short right up until the early 1970s.

The Alabama Library Association also failed in its service to African Americans. When someone suggested opening up the association to African Americans in 1949, a resounding “no” was voiced. Most were “definitely opposed to the idea,” “not ready,” and that “the implications were entirely too great” (Barrett & Bishop 155). William Stanley Hoole, who sat on the executive council of the association, wanted to know “who is stuffing these Negroes down our throats?” (148). With this overwhelming dissent, the association agreed that “Alabama will do well not to open membership to Negroes” (157).

In December of 1963, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights published its investigation into Southern libraries. It was full, of what the Commission called, “devastating evidence” (189), of what most in the South already knew: That “two thirds of the Negro population of 13 Southern States were entirely without library services,” and that “nearly 10 million Negro citizens of our land are totally or partially denied access to publicly owned books” (189). The Commission found barring African Americans from libraries was “an indefensible act of discrimination,” and “absurd.” They were even less amused by the “lack of cooperation and open hostility of the State and local officials” (190). The commission concluded “surely...these discriminations violate the Federal law...surely they also violate the equal protection clause” (190).

It was these exact circumstances that helped create Freedom Libraries.

The Selma Freedom Library

It was simply called the Selma Free Library.

It was created in the summer of 1965 by a handful of civil rights movement workers, who—exactly like other libraries in Alabama’s history—were responding to a community need. The Selma Free Library came into existence through the efforts of Peter Kellman (Maine), Charles Fager (California), Doris Smith (Texas), and Dennis Coleman (Wisconsin).

The library itself was located in a storefront on Lapsley Street; rented to them by a local mailman who lived next

door with his family. It was just down the street from Selma University (see appendices for map).

Its sources of funding were as disparate as the people who ran it. Fager recalls “a local black men’s fraternity or lodge agreed to pay the rent.” Other sources of finances possibly came in from SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and SCOPE (Summer Community Organization and Political Education). Kellman had hoped to get some of the money earmarked by President Johnson for the war on poverty. He remembers:

“I did try to make a trip to Washington, to get some poverty money from Lyndon Johnson’s poverty program. One of the reasons that it existed was because of the Civil Rights Movement...and there was money for things like libraries [and] bookmobiles. I visited a number of bureaucrats in Washington but I wasn’t able to get us any funding” (Kellman).

Kellman was the one who actually designed and built all the shelves for the library. He recalls:

“My thing was I was into building things, and I pretty much figured out, you know the design and did a lot of the work and built all the bookcases, and the bookcases were made of like 2 x 12s; we had a lot” (Kellman).

As well as the finances, the donation of books and materials came from varied sources. After the nation witnessed or read about the events of Bloody Sunday, concerned Americans began to send care packages to Alabama. SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) field staff member Bruce Hartford recalls that “people in the north sent a massive amount of food, clothing, and books to Selma. We ended up with thousands of books that we had no idea what to do with because all our energies were focused on voter registration rather than freedom schools and libraries (Hartford).

These donations were by no means the only ones to fill the Selma Free Library. Charles Fager was instrumental in a successful book drive for the library. He recalls that “many thousands of books were collected and shipped to Selma by supporters mainly around San Francisco (I had met some of them and encouraged this idea)” (Fager).

Northern colleges also sent book donations, including Antioch College in Ohio and San Francisco State College. Dennis Coleman has stated that “book donations came from a wide variety of sources which were heavy on the academic side” (Coleman). During the previous year in Selma, SNCC had organized a literacy project. It is possible that any books used then may have also been donated for the library to use.

It needs to be particularly noted that this small group of volunteers unintentionally created one of the largest public libraries in all of Alabama. In a letter sent on August 12, 1965 to San Francisco State College, Charles Fager

reported that the library “presently numbers 18,000 volumes, rivaling in the size any in western Alabama and easily bettering them in quality” (Leventhal 441). Peter Kellman confirms this number:

“It was huge! I am trying to remember...the number 20,000 sticks in my mind. I remember that one time we checked out the different libraries in southwestern Alabama and it was the largest in terms of books; no one had any more books than the Selma library did” (Kellman).

While the sheer number of books reported here may seem fanciful, these numbers reflect what the Freedom Libraries in Mississippi had in 1964. Cook found their collections “ranged from a few hundred volumes to more than 20,000” (xviii). Also, by the summer of 1965 SNCC’s Atlanta office had been swamped with donations numbering “between 100,000 and a quarter of a million books” (Wood 13).

After 50 years, what exactly those shelves contain remains unknown; no document has surfaced which lists the exact items found in the Selma Free Library. Fortunately, memories of those who set up and worked at the library are still accessible. In keeping with the Civil Rights Movement, the “the collection was strong on Negro authors,” and “heavy on the academic side” (Coleman). Peter Kellman believes there “were a fair amount of academic books and a large section on Black History and Black Writers” (Kellman). He also recalls:

“The ones that were the most popular were James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* and a few of his other books...and one of the most popular books was Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. We got a lot of books from the universities, and they were philosophy and those kinds of books, for courses, but there were also a lot of the books from the English department, so it wasn’t just academic textbooks. There were a lot of novels, autobiographies and things that people would probably read while in college” (Kellman).

As Cook noted in her Mississippi study, the libraries also served Civil Rights Movement volunteers as well. With this in mind, it is possible the collection also contained the books SCOPE recommended the volunteers closely read before they headed into Alabama (see appendices for book list).

No library can function if its collection is not organized in a systematic way, and the Selma Free Library was no exception. Dennis Coleman recalls all the books as having been “cataloged and shelved” (Coleman). In his letter to San Francisco State College, Charles Fager informed them that “the collection covers every category in the Dewey Decimal System and is being organized along professional library lines” (Leventhal 441). Although the Dewey Decimal Classification may have been covered, it was not employed in its typical fashion. “We didn’t do the Dewey Decimal System,” recalled Peter Kellman. “We did it by

topic: philosophy was “WHY” because that is what philosophy is about, the question why” (Kellman). He also stated that biography would be labeled WHO, geography WHERE, and history WHEN.

One of the most fascinating yet telling aspects of the library was the community it served. Located on the same street as Selma University, a surprising number of students favored the Selma Free Library over their own institution’s library. Bruce Hartford stated that “SU had recently built a new library building with shelf space for (I think) around 50,000 books... but most of the shelves were empty” (Hartford). Peter Kellman confirms this, writing the university “was right down the street from us. They had a new library building but very few books and many of their students used our library” (Kellman).

While the library’s overriding *raison d’être* was to provide Selma’s African American community with “the first meaningful contact with books and libraries” (Cook xviii), the city of Selma already had a public library, one that had desegregated two years earlier.

Research by Toby Patterson Graham clearly illustrates the heroic efforts of Patricia Blalock, who was appointed director of the Selma Carnegie Library in 1963. At great risk to her career and livelihood, Blalock made desegregating the library her first priority. She was successful, and on May 20, 1963, the Selma Carnegie Library opened its doors to all races (Graham 115).

A full two years later, volunteers at the Selma Free Library recall the African American residents of Selma still referred to it as “the white library” (Kellman). Dennis Coleman clearly recalls that “Selma had a library but children in the Negro schools felt a little intimidated using it” (Coleman). As part of her desegregation stance, Blalock was forced to accept the Selma’s board insistence on “vertical integration”—the inane practice of removing a library’s furniture, to “prevent white and black patrons from sitting together” (Graham 117). The civil rights volunteers believe this practice to still be in effect in 1965.

Whatever constraints Blalock was forced to put up with, it appears she felt no ill will or competition from the Selma Free Library. Peter Kellman remembers Blalock referring people to the Freedom Library:

“I remember one time some white kids came, young people, because librarians there didn’t have a book and they thought we might have it. So they came, and that was the only time I ever remember anyone white from Selma coming” (Kellman).

In her memoir on running a Freedom Library in Mississippi, Sally Belfrage describes the constant level of chaos and use the library received (89). The one is Selma was no exception:

“...there were a lot of kids from the neighborhood who would hang out there. They would always be stopping by, and because the movement was still in

progress, there was a lot of talk. It wasn’t comparable to the library where I lived, or had lived...it was a center of discussion; all kinds of things were talked about” (Kellman).

Similar to other civil rights initiatives in Alabama, the goal of the volunteers was to have the library turned over to the residents of Selma. In another letter to San Francisco State College, Patricia Fager wrote “We want the library to be turned over to the local people as soon as possible...we are training several girls to catalog and take care of the library in general” (Leventhal 439). A separate report confirms this, stating “local girls are being trained to catalogue and operate the Library, also they can take it over when it is finally located in a permanent home” (441).

It remains unclear just how long the Selma Free Library continued in operation. Civil rights projects usually lasted until summer’s end, as most volunteers needed to return to college and university. However, Kellman, Fager, Coleman and Hartford all recall the library being in operation until early 1966.

When the library dissolved, what happened to its collection? Initially the collection was turned over to the library’s neighbor, Selma University. This seemed only natural, as the library workers clearly remember the students from there using the Freedom Library. However, the administration of the university didn’t want any items from the Freedom Library. Bruce Hartford stated “the college trustees were afraid to have anything to do with the Freedom Movement and were deeply suspicious of the radical ideas that might be contained in books from the North, so they rejected the offer” (Hartford).

“In the end,” Kellman stated, “The library was turned over to a group of Black Librarians in Dallas County, and I think they divided up the books among their libraries” (Kellman).

The Hayneville Freedom Library

One overriding characteristic of the Hayneville Freedom Library is the simple fact that it existed at all. This small Alabama town is the county seat of Lowndes County, which also encompasses the surrounding towns of White Hall and Fort Deposit. Lowndes is better known by the familiar moniker “Bloody Lowndes” (Jeffries 213). Stokely Carmichael called it “the Devil’s Backyard” (8), while others called it “worse than hell” (Eagles 114), and “the very heart of darkness” (126). A seasoned U.S. marshal admitted Lowndes was “no man’s land and I am afraid of it” (126).

The history of the county is marked by death and terror for its African American residents. Chronic violence was used “to enforce white supremacy, slavery, peonage, disfranchisement and segregation” (Eagles 89.) Hayneville in particular was “a place where whites could brutalize blacks and their white allies without fear of punishment in the halls of justice” (117). Compared to the rest of Alabama, Jeffries found Lowndes county to be “remarkably

poor,” characterized by its “grinding poverty and fierce brutality” (27). While planning for the Selma to Montgomery march, Martin Luther King was warned by his supporters not to march through Lowndes.

SNCC’s director Silas Norman worried about sending volunteers, acknowledging “the decision was Lowndes County was so bad no one would come in there” (Jeffries 60). Conversely, Stokely Carmichael wanted to go there because of its violent and sinister history. “If they [SNCC volunteers] could help crack Lowndes,” he said, “other areas would be much easier” (Jeffries 60). In the summer of 1965, SNCC launched a “monumental effort to remove the basic causes of alienation, frustration, despair, low self-esteem and hopelessness” (Jeffries 488). The Hayneville Freedom Library was created for this very purpose.

Jeffries notes that SNCC activists held discussions on African American history “at the freedom library they established in Hayneville during the summer” (99). The library was located at 123 Cemetery Road, an unpaved dead-end just north of Hayneville’s downtown core.

The Hayneville Freedom Library operated in the home of Pattie Mae and Leon McDonald. This put them in severe physical danger. In his ten-year research project on the county, Jeffries noted:

“Pattie McDonald, a forty-four-year-old homemaker and the mother of several young children, recognized early on the value of parallel institutions, including the need for freedom library. This prompted her to let SNCC use the small two-room house that sat unoccupied just behind her modest Hayneville home” (Jeffries 100).

Almost immediately, harassing phone calls, stalking and death threats soon plagued the McDonald family. And then there was the September 1st incident (described above), in which the Klan riddled the McDonald home with bullets. This attempted murder of a family of twelve went unreported in the news, and uninvestigated by law enforcement. Only *Jet Magazine* in Chicago found the story worth publishing.

The McDonald’s son, Willie James McDonald, was instrumental in the library’s beginnings:

“I was the one that started it at the time. I found a board, probably 1 x 6 maybe 5 feet long, and I had some paint, and I painted Freedom Library on it, and I put it over the door, and we put the books inside. It [the library itself] was made from used lumber. When they first started building the interstate system, my dad would get off work and we would get used lumber. He would haul it home on the back of his boss truck, and in the evenings and on the weekend we constructed the building” (McDonald).

As with all Freedom Libraries, the collection was donated. Willie McDonald recalls “all the books were donated from

Tuskegee University, which was called Tuskegee Institute at the time.” Unfortunately no titles are remembered, no list exists, and the number of items the library possessed is also unknown.

Not only had the students from Tuskegee donated the books, but they also volunteered daily at the library. Willie McDonald recalls:

“At that time we had students come down from the Tuskegee Institute, which was in Macon County, they would come down to Lowndes County after school, and they would tutor the students in Lowndes County” (McDonald).

McDonald can recall Stokely Carmichael using the library, as “his name went down in the history books.” Carmichael had great affection for the residents of Hayneville, and he was dedicated to making “it a fit place for human beings” (Jeffries 82).

Two other regulars at the Hayneville Freedom Library were civil rights volunteers Jonathan Daniels (a seminary student), and Richard Morrisroe (an ordained priest). One of them even donated a bible to the library, which still exists in the McDonald home today. On August 20th that summer, Daniels was shot to death while trying to buy a coke at a store in downtown Hayneville. Morrisroe was also shot, but survived the ordeal. Willie McDonald:

“My mother does have one book that was left. It was a Catholic Bible, and we are not Catholic, but they had two Catholic priests that were gunned down in Hayneville, and they had given my mother a book and it has a [freedom library] stamp inside it” (McDonald).

After the September 1st shooting of their home, the McDonalds dissolved the Hayneville Freedom Library. Pattie Mae McDonald burned the library collection, in an attempt to save the lives of her children. Willie McDonald again:

“And all the books, after it was all said and done, my mother burned the books, and the only reason she didn’t burn this particular book was because it was a bible. Now mother isn’t Catholic, but that is the word of God and that is the only book left from the library” (McDonald).

Lasting Impact

In his article *The Last Days of Jim Crow in Southern Libraries*, Cresswell concluded that the freedom libraries were completely ineffective, and “efforts lavished on the freedom libraries were efforts often misspent” (567). Susan Lee Scott also came to a similar conclusion, writing “the question of library integration was never a major focus in the civil rights movement in the South” (168).

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In her exhaustive study of Mississippi freedom libraries, Cook found that “the freedom libraries assisted African Americans “in their quest for human dignity and full citizenship”. The libraries engendered a love of books and reading, and strengthened the locals people’s desire for access to libraries” (384). Her analysis clearly demonstrated the undeniable fact that “Freedom Libraries offered genuine library services to people in need of them” (384). This is supported by Davidson who states that freedom libraries “not only provided library services to people excluded from other libraries, but made visible through their collections the history and culture of black Americans” (519).

It would be erroneous to conclude that freedom libraries, (and libraries in general), were not critical to the civil rights movement. “Libraries played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement,” stated Civil Rights leader and current Congressman John Lewis. “They were an invaluable source of information” (Chepesiuk & Teaster-Woods 140). Fellow leader Joseph Lowery also felt libraries played a significant role during the civil rights movement, stating “libraries helped black people understand their history” (140). Ruth Shoge’s 2003 research into what motivating factors exist when African Americans use libraries, found that “enthusiasm by Blacks for the library had its heyday during the civil rights movement in America” (iii).

Kellman also supports this, stating that “part of the [civil rights] struggle was to get control of your past away from those who would define you; those who put you in a subservient position to begin with. I think that is one reason why the libraries were so important” (Kellman). For Cresswell and Scott to dismiss these efforts as trivial highlights a serious flaw in their research.

Adverse Conditions

In the summer of 1965 in Alabama, local and out-of-state volunteers came together to create substantial and lasting change through the operation of a freedom library. This was no small thing. As Stephens reported in her historical research, the dedication required “for establishing and maintaining community libraries” (28) can be arduous even in ideal conditions. To set one up under adverse conditions, where horrific psychological and physical abuse is the norm, where property is routinely destroyed, where careers are ended, and where murder is a real possibility, is nothing short of heroic.

The Hayneville Freedom Library and the Selma Free Library both operated in an atmosphere of terror. Pete Kellman recalls:

“The fear never left you. We didn’t have cars or anything like that. We didn’t have money. We had to figure out a way to go where you were exposed the least to traffic. One thing we did a lot was get to the railroad tracks and walk down them, or try to figure out just how to stay in black neighbourhoods. Never walk on highway 80—that was a constant because our friends were killed. So the fear is always there. It never left. It was one of the toughest things to deal with” (2013).

Even on his bus trips to DC to try and get funding for the library, Kellman was followed and harassed the entire way.

In Hayneville, the McDonalds knew this fear all too well. Before the shooting in September, they were under constant threat:

“Word reached them...that Leon McDonald, Pattie’s husband, was the focus of an assassination plot. The two white men who stalked him every morning as he walked to catch his ride to work and every evening as he returned home lent credence to the rumors. In addition, during the middle of August, the McDonalds repeatedly spotted a pair of white men—perhaps the same duo that had been shadowing Leon—stalking out the freedom library, and friends informed them that whites were planning to bomb their home” (Jeffries 100).

Even African Americans who were born and raised in Alabama found it near impossible “to endure the stress, danger, isolation, poor diet, and unpleasant living conditions in Lowndes” (Eagles 133). The psychological courage needed to operate a library under these circumstances remains remarkable.

Conclusion

“Well Mike, I am afraid you will not find any evidence for a freedom library in Alabama,” wrote Myrna Wood in her reply to an information request. As indicated above, this (thankfully) turned out not be the case.

It is hoped the discovery of the Alabama Freedom Libraries will provide new insight into various avenues of research. Both libraries shed light on the grassroots development of a library under extreme conditions, which may be of interest to those in the library and information science field. Those studying the civil rights movement may also find use of some of the findings reported here, as well as a new appreciation in the critical role libraries played during the movement. It is also hoped the Selma Free Library and the Hayneville Freedom Library find their way into the history of Alabama libraries. They (and those who ran them) are far too important to remain ignored and forgotten.

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