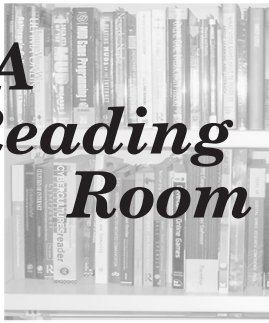


A Reading Room



of Their Own

Library Services for African Americans in Oklahoma, 1907–1946

*By R. O. Joe Cassity, Jr.**

As the African American residents of Guthrie gathered on a September evening in the fall of 1908 to mark the opening of the first black library in the state of Oklahoma, the event must have provided much thoughtful reflection among the cele-

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brants present. As noted in the *Oklahoma Guide*, the African American newspaper serving one-fifth of the city's residents, "The dedication of the Excelsior Library was a success. Good speaking and sweet music rang out in the night and the Bible readers present were reminded of the dedication of Solomon's Temple 3,000 years ago."¹

Seven years earlier the *Guide* had happily announced plans for the construction of what was to become the thirty-five-thousand-dollar Carnegie Library, the most elaborate facility up to that time available in the state.² Unfortunately, in the years immediately following the opening of the Carnegie Library the city's black population found the doors barred by the pandemic Jim Crow racism sweeping their state and region. But in 1908 they could celebrate their own Excelsior Library, a small, wood-frame building with a collection of nearly one thousand books, a treasury of eight hundred dollars, and a staff of workers who made up for their lack of formal training with a reservoir of boundless enthusiasm.³ Eight months later, as the editor of the local black newspaper assessed the library's progress and operation, he observed that "no one ask[s] for a separate library at any time, we only ask for a library. . . . We had the library running for eight months and the library doors were open to every citizen."⁴

For the following five decades Oklahoma blacks continued their struggle for adequate library services in a wide range of aspects. However, the persisting problems of poverty and racism placed almost insurmountable barriers in the path of improving both public and institutional libraries by means of collection development and enhanced services. Moreover, on the basis of contemporary information and resources collected on black libraries in southwestern states during these years, it is now possible to analyze the historical development of library services on a region-wide basis. Conjointly, any study of racial discrimination in the "Southwest" must take note of inequalities throughout the entire American South.

For example, Eliza Atkins Gleason's 1941 study *The Southern Negro and the Public Library* noted her reasons for including Oklahoma and Texas in her surveys. She found that although these two states differed from the Old South in a number of respects, in "climate, population, economy, and social attitudes" the similarities had led to a comparable library development.⁵ Most of Oklahoma's African American population resided in a thin belt of counties that extended along the Canadian River in the eastern half of the state. A supplementary, though smaller, portion of the black population

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lived in a few southern, rural counties along the Texas and Arkansas boundaries. Regrettably, from the beginning of statehood Jim Crow legislation and policies found universal and enthusiastic enforcement. In 1908 the first session of the new state's legislature made a comprehensive Jim Crow law the first law to be passed in the state's history. They then followed with laws to restrict black voting and subsequently left no stone unturned in their endeavor to create a thoroughly apartheid society. One response to the plight of omnipresent racism was the effort of African Americans to create Oklahoma's community of all-black towns, and in one, Boley, women of the Industrial Club sponsored a library beginning in 1910 and constructed a building for it in 1933.⁶

In addition, the preponderantly rural concentration of Oklahoma's black population, particularly in the first three decades of the twentieth century, posed intractable logistical impediments to the delivery of library services. Consequently, African Americans in the rural environment faced a more daunting challenge than was the case with black communities in more urbanized Southern settings. Ernest Miller, in his study of conditions in Tennessee, found the urban location of half of that state's African American population very helpful in the delivery of services.⁷ In sum, library services in rural Oklahoma were almost totally nonexistent throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and this severely adverse condition prevailed for whites as well as blacks. By 1937 only eleven institutions provided books to the African American population,⁸ and all of them were in areas that were not rural.

The library services available to black patrons in urban areas may be classified in three categories. First, the five largest Oklahoma cities, Guthrie, Okmulgee, Muskogee, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa eventually maintained completely separate all-black municipal libraries. These institutions provided a rudimentary, grossly inadequate level of service for four and a half decades.

Second, the other public libraries of the state established what they termed "extension services for Negroes." While this policy of "extension" was never clearly defined, it indicated an insubstantial pretense that some sort of tiny branch library had been established in a black residential area, and black patrons were absolutely prohibited from any usage of the main public library. In 1911 Oklahoma's legislature revised the public library law to allow first-class cities with more than one thousand black citizens to establish a library for African Americans, and in 1929 all cities with more than one thousand black population were allowed to do so.⁹ As of 1941,

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only one public library in Oklahoma (Ponca City) reported a policy of permitting black patrons to keep a card at the city's main public library.¹⁰

Third, as a small compensatory measure, the principal state institutions for African Americans, a college, an orphanage, a correctional facility, and black public school systems, also reported the establishment of libraries at various times during these years. However, as will be shown later, these small libraries offered decidedly inferior collections and levels of service. Moreover, any discussion of the services provided by the black libraries, public libraries, and state institutions therefore must seek to examine the original establishment of these facilities, their reception among the black community, the types of services they offered, the training of their staff personnel, and library collection development.

From the very beginning of Oklahoma's history as a state in 1907, the ruling establishment decreed that segregation would be a central policy governing everyday life. And this policy exerted an early and enduring impact on the type and availability of library services. While Guthrie completely barred black patrons from the use of its new Carnegie Library, Oklahoma City restricted black patrons to a separate reading room. These universally mandated tenets of segregation, accompanied by the usual atmosphere of community wide harassment and intimidation, could only have led to an unwillingness among many African Americans to utilize libraries where they might expect discourteous treatment. Consequently, as Oklahoma City established a separate reading room, a city librarian pointed out that only two Oklahoma City blacks made consistent use of the public library, although she theorized that this separate facility would, in the course of time, encourage more African Americans to patronize the local library.¹¹

Eventually five Oklahoma cities, Guthrie, Okmulgee, Muskogee, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa established all-black libraries. Of these, the Excelsior Library in Guthrie enjoyed the longest continuous existence and left the most complete record concerning its founding and everyday activities. As was the case with many libraries in white communities, a women's club provided the main driving force for the Guthrie Excelsior Library. In January 1908 the Excelsior Women's Club, a black women's group, published its plan to raise five thousand dollars for an African American library. Calling for the establishment of a "Library and Industrial Institute for Negroes," the group declared that "the women of this club have put

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▶▶▶NOTICE

The Ladies of the EXCELSIOR CLUB will serve dinner and supper, on Thanksgiving at the Library Building Cor., Second and Springer.
The benefits are for the Excelsior Library.
Let every one come out and spend some time and money, to help this

The local women's club used various fund-raising events to support the Excelsior Library. From The Oklahoma Guide, November 1908.

their time, their talent, their Christianity, and their money into this noble cause and we are absolutely certain of success. . . .”¹²

Over the following eight months the club successfully enlisted the support of the black community’s leadership and gained pledges of financial support from a number of prominent white politicians. A number of these leading white political leaders, also made financial contributions to the library fund. The *Oklahoma Guide*, the local black newspaper, quickly published on its front page a list of benefactors, with the size of their contributions.¹³ Eventually, the group succeeded in raising one thousand dollars in contributions, secured two-thousand-dollar appropriations from the city council, purchased a building, and collected “nearly 1,000 books.”¹⁴

Following the new library’s opening in September 1908, the facility enjoyed a highly successful, if sometimes contentious, record of activity. With the passage of time, the centrally all-important role of religion in the black community’s everyday life supplied the leading subject matter for rivalry and difference of opinion among the library’s patrons and supporters. In January 1909 Judith (Mrs. J. C.) Horton, the library’s director, announced that Bible classes would be held in the library every Sunday afternoon from 3 to 5 p.m. In order to prevent interference with the established activities of community churches, the “Young Peoples Bible Class” required participants to be at least fourteen years of age. This weekly program of Bible study was then combined with a speaking schedule featuring the appearance of a prominent African American leader every fourth

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Sunday.¹⁵ Inman E. Page, president of nearby Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston University), delivered a well-received speech as one of this activity's earliest speakers.¹⁶

However, this program of religiously oriented activities soon resulted in a wave of polemics and argumentation. In April 1909, ten weeks after the beginning of the scheduled Bible classes, six local black ministers petitioned the library's board to have the classes canceled.¹⁷ Noting their support for the principle of separation of church and state, the ministers reminded board members that religious activities did not come within the normally accepted scope of library functions.¹⁸ After seven months of internal strife within the African American community, the library finally announced the cancellation of the classes. Interestingly, comments published in *The Owl*, a white publication, supported the idea of library Bible classes and smugly gloated over the trouble the issue had caused within the black community.¹⁹

Fortunately, during the following two years the library published periodic statistical reports that may reflection the level of participation within the local black community of fifteen hundred. The reports usually limited their coverage to the number of "visitors," "members," and "books loaned," but still the published numbers reveal some interesting trends. Unfortunately, the following compilation of monthly reports printed during 1910, 1911, and 1912 is fragmentary and limited. It is based on only those statistical reports published in the *Oklahoma Guide*:²⁰

	March	April	August	December	March	April
	1910	1910	1910	1911	1912	1912
Members	Over 300	—	—	480	632	357
Visitors	506	455	346	717	1,370	2,200
Books Loaned	226	214	110	309	740	650

Although statistics may always give rise to varying interpretations, these figures and the library's subsequent history do present a consistent picture of solidly progressive development. In summary, while it appears that library membership doubled, and circulation tripled between 1910 and 1912. Consideration of these figures should be supplemented with periodic news reports of concom-

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itant library activities and related developments. As an example, when in 1911 a white member of the city council proposed closing the library, the *Oklahoma Guide* declared that the facility received ten to forty-three visitors each day and that closing it would be “a shameful outrage on our people. . . .”²¹ The next month the paper presented the following story on library activities: “The library is blooming like a green Bay tree. It would please all lovers of good citizenship to be at the Library some evening and see the scholars coming and asking the Librarian and Assistant ‘I want something on Easter,’ and others wanted Ben Hur [*sic*], Emerson, and dozens of other kinds of books called at the library in one day.”²² Continuing in its effort to build up its collection with a limited budget, the library also sponsored a special reception on New Year’s Day in 1912 and announced that “the price of admission will be a book or silver offering to be used to benefit the library.”²³ Although the library did not achieve its goal of one hundred additional books, it did receive eighty volumes. The staff reported a small cash collection of \$2.86.²⁴

Over the following decades the Excelsior Library continued in its strides toward progress, and by 1936 the institution reported a collection of fifteen thousand books, making it one of the largest black libraries in the South. It also reported a policy of providing service seven days a week.²⁵ By 1937, in the depths of the Great Depression, the library reported subscriptions to twenty-seven periodicals, ten newspapers, and an impressive collection books written by prominent black authors.²⁶

However, throughout its history of operation, spanning almost five decades, the library appears to have received only a minimal amount of support from the white-dominated city government. One full-time, untrained librarian and a part-time assistant consistently supplied the staffing needs during these years. By 1951 the library could report that its “general and reference collections are inadequate for local needs.”²⁷ Nonetheless, even in the face of these challenging limitations, the library still sought to supply local needs through “a vacation reading club, book week activities, painting classes, “and its ever-growing black authors collection.”²⁸

Although the Excelsior Library made valiant efforts to fill the gap left by a segregated system, the quality of services available to black residents of Guthrie remained markedly inferior to those accessible to the local white population. Lamentably, the services supplied by black libraries in the other four cities provide even clearer evidence of the desire of local white power structures to provide

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scarcely more than a sham for compliance with their responsibilities under the prevailing “separate but equal” legal doctrine.

The citizens of Okmulgee did establish an ambitious program of library construction in 1923, providing eighteen thousand dollars for a black library construction project. Although the facility struggled as a result of persistent budgetary problems, eventually it stood as the most expensive separate library building in the state. Nevertheless, future white-dominated city councils made no separate provision for the purchase of books and supplies, leaving the facility to depend on whatever resources the overall system chose to hand down. At the end of World War II the building’s use as a public library ultimately was compromised by the city’s decision to move this library serving the local African American school system within the school’s walls, thereby creating a combined school-public library.²⁹

An African American library in Muskogee, also organized by a black women’s club, began operations in 1914. Eventually the facility managed to build up a collection of seventy-six hundred volumes within the four rooms of its small, wood-frame building. Unfortunately, a fire in 1928 destroyed two-thirds of its collection and temporarily put the small library out of service. It reopened, but the level of services remained pitifully inadequate. With meager financial support from the city government (the budget remaining at a thirteen-hundred-dollars per year), the brutal harshness of segregation as applied to libraries emerged with sharply grim reality. Muskogee, with a black population of almost seven thousand, provided a library that throughout most of its existence could provide an average of only three-fifths of a volume per resident. A 1936 survey reported the small library’s four rooms were “crowded most of the time.” But even under these conditions the facility did manage to sponsor 145 “story hours and club meetings” during the same year and reportedly maintained close ties with local African American social and civic clubs.³⁰

Contemporary press accounts and library statistics reveal that the low-quality library service for black residents in the state’s largest city perhaps rivaled that of the most backward regions of the Old South. Oklahoma City’s Dunbar Library, established in 1926, achieved a volume count of thirty-six hundred by 1936, or about one-fourth of a volume for each of the city’s black residents.³¹ The unavailability of adequate library service perennially served as a point of concern for the *Black Dispatch*, the state’s leading black newspaper from 1917 onward. This paper undeviatingly voiced its burning resentment of the refusal of the local white establishment

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to provide adequate cultural and educational resources for African Americans at all levels. The newspaper trenchantly flayed what it perceived as a clear pattern of white politicians subverting existing black institutions to their own selfish patronage needs. As Roscoe Dunjee, the editor, charged in 1939, the hiring of a black librarian was usually based on the recommendation that “her sister cooks for



Oklahoma City's Dunbar Library, circa 1930 (Courtesy Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library System).



Dunbar Library Reading Room, circa 1940 (Courtesy Oklahoma County Metropolitan Library System).

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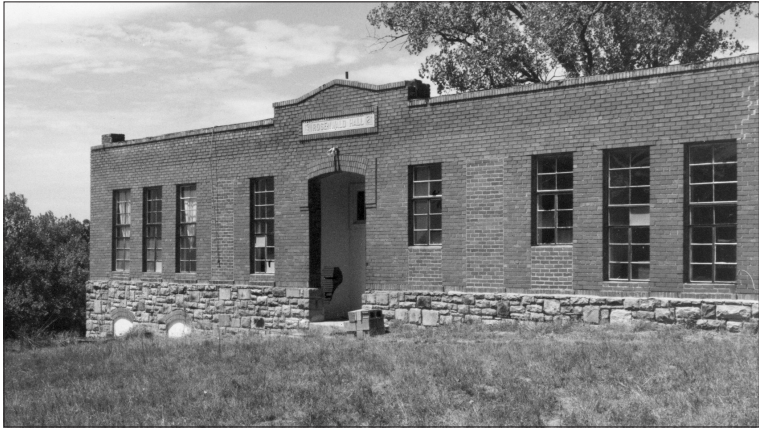
judge so-and-so," rather than on an assessment of her educational qualifications or experience.³²

Tulsa began offering separate library services through a "colored branch" in 1924 in the Greenwood District. Alma Reid McGlenn was its first librarian. In 1932 Tulsans approved a bond issue to provide the Greenwood Branch with a ten-thousand-dollar brick building.³³ Christine Carey, a Hampton-trained librarian, ran the branch for a number of years. By 1937 the Greenwood Branch held three thousand volumes and had a circulation of nineteen thousand volumes. Approximately one-third of Tulsa's African American community possessed a library card. By 1946 the institution owned 5,398 volumes (compared to Oklahoma City's 7,919), and both the Greenwood and Dunbar libraries had a circulation of more than sixty-three thousand.³⁴

Despite these continuous efforts to move forward, service in the state's five largest black public libraries remained woefully inadequate and in other state communities approached piecemeal paternalism in its starkest form. Answering a survey questionnaire in 1951, the Clinton Public Library stated that "service is extended to Negroes, hospitals, jails, and residents of the county."³⁵ Normally, this universal policy indicated that the municipal public library periodically sent packages of books to a local black school and that black adults could obtain desired materials, if at all, only by going through that intermediary. Visiting the main public library was not an available option.

With the persistent tendency of white administrators to obliterate the distinction between black public libraries and black public school libraries, it is necessary to consider the nature of libraries in the black public schools. During these years, in comparison to other states Oklahoma ranked close to the bottom in spending on education, so it is reasonably presumable that libraries in many of the white schools were as poor as those in the black schools, and the latter do appear to have been grossly inadequate. About the only optimistic hope for library growth in black schools during this period resulted from a drive by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, in which the fund agreed to supply one-third of the needed funds to black schools seeking to expand their libraries. During the decade from 1927 to 1937 a total of thirteen thousand dollars, from both Rosenwald and local black sources, was expended nationally on book purchases for black school libraries. Still, even this amount totaled an average of only a little more than sixty dollars for each of the two hundred participating schools.³⁶ By 1937 African Americans could patronize a

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Rosenwald Hall, Lima, Oklahoma (State Historic Preservation Office / Susan Allen photo).

school-public library in Enid's Booker T. Washington School (1922), Sapulpa's Booker T. Washington High School (1923), Chickasha's Lincoln School (1926), Tahlequah's Lincoln School (1929), and Ponca City's Attucks School (1927).³⁷

Perhaps the saddest commentaries on the gross inequalities of the educational system, yet one of the most inspiring examples of black demands for improvement, is provided by the case of Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston University) in 1897. Until the middle of the twentieth century this school provided the only in-state opportunity for blacks desiring a college education. In view of this heavy and awesome responsibility, it is indeed appalling to note that the college had absolutely no library facilities at all throughout the first three decades of its existence. Not until 1927 did the school manage to make a meager beginning toward the establishment of a library with the gift of one hundred volumes from Inman E. Page, its outgoing president. During the years that followed, the library grew to about five thousand volumes as the result of gifts from former students and grants from the Rosenwald Fund.³⁸

The United States Supreme Court rang out the last decade of the nineteenth century with its "separate-but-equal" doctrine in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Nonetheless, Oklahoma's state and local authorities totally disregarded their legal and ethical responsibilities to provide truly "equal" library facilities. By the end of the 1930s the total volume collection of Oklahoma's black libraries

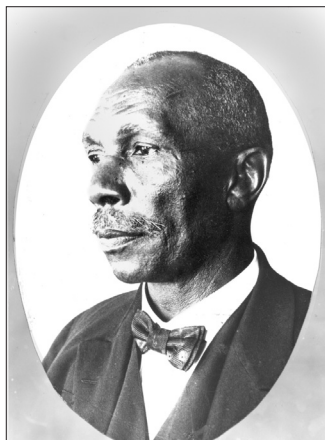
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*Reading Room, Langston University's Harrison Library
(OHS photos).*



*Oklahoma
educator
Inman E. Page,
first president
of Colored
Agricultural and
Normal
(Langston)
University
(OHS photo).*



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(including 37,501 books) averaged one-fifth of a volume for each of the state's black residents.³⁹ Only two professionally trained African American librarians were ever employed at any one time throughout the state's system (in Oklahoma City and in Tulsa). The Hampton Institute's School of Library Science closed at the end of the 1930s, thereby shutting off this potential source of trained personnel. In 1946 the Oklahoma Library Association reported that eight of eleven existing African American public libraries (the city of Cushing having established a separate library in the intervening years) operated in their own buildings and that three, Chickasha, Enid, and Stillwater, still existed in segregated schools.⁴⁰

On the basis of this sad record it appears that the goal of the white establishment only concerned itself with the necessity of fabricating a sham of a library system that would provide a legal excuse for barring black usage of library resources available to whites. However, even in the face of severely adverse conditions the black population's continuing demand for library facilities provides an inspiring example of grassroots support for progressive improvement in Oklahoma's library services.

ENDNOTES

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¹ *Oklahoma Guide* (Guthrie, Oklahoma), September 24, 1908.

² *Ibid.*, November 7, 1901.

³ *Ibid.*, October 1, 1908.

⁴ *Ibid.*, March 23, 1911.

⁵ Eliza Atkins Gleason, *The Southern Negro and the Public Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), 9.

⁶ Oklahoma Library Commission, *Oklahoma Libraries, 1900-1937* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Library Commission, 1937), 169.

⁷ Ernest I. Miller, "Library Service for Negroes in Tennessee," *Journal of Negro Education* 40 (October 1941): 636.

⁸ *Oklahoma Libraries*, 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹ *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), March 3, 1909.

¹² *Oklahoma Guide*, February 27, 1908.

¹³ *Ibid.*, August 6, 1908. The first list appeared on this date and was printed in subsequent issues as more subscribers joined the movement.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, September 24, 1908.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, January 28, 1909.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1909.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 22, 1909.

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- ²⁰ Ibid., September 1, 1910, April 11, 1912, June 2, 1910, and January 7, 1912.
- ²¹ Ibid., March 9, 1911.
- ²² Ibid., April 6, 1911.
- ²³ Ibid., December 21, 1911.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ *Oklahoma Libraries*, 167.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Esther May Henke, "The History of Public Libraries in Oklahoma" (M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1954), 69.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 50.
- ³⁰ *Oklahoma Libraries*, 168.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), June 23, 1939.
- ³³ *Oklahoma Libraries*, 166.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 169.
- ³⁵ Henke, "The History of Public Libraries in Oklahoma," 59.
- ³⁶ *Oklahoma Libraries*, 242–43.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 166–70.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 136.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 166.
- ⁴⁰ *Reports of the Oklahoma Library Commission and Survey of Libraries of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Library Commission, 1946), 24.