"The Proper Setting for a Miracle"

By KAREN MONRAD JONES

WITHOUT any financial backing, a young southerner who is still fighting his own way up to education, has set in motion a growing chain of libraries, which ranks high among recent projects for extending library service to Negroes in the South. Romance is in the story of his five postage stamps; of the day when he stared unbelievingly at a thousand books, when he scarcely had dared hope for one; of the building of his first log cabin library among South Carolina pines. But behind it is a background of sobering facts.

For of the eight million Negroes in the South, *eighty percent* are still said to have no access whatever to libraries, countless schools have not even an antiquated encyclopedia, thirty children use a single geography, one reading aloud while the others listen, and rural teachers are starving for books and magazines.

Down in South Carolina, Willie Lee Buffington has taken his own way of bringing about a miracle, and is building up a library service that is unique in the simplicity of its demands, in the soundness of its methods, and in the magnitude of its possibilities. He has not waited for a perfected, machinery, nor for the attention of the foundations, nor for a fortune of his own. He has created his machinery. He has won the friendship and approval of white and Negro school and college officials, and of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. He has developed contacts in the North as well as the South; he has a source of book supply that might easily become permanent; and he has stimulated the interest of the Negroes themselves in community building enterprise. His libraries are astonishing proof that "great sums are not necessary to achieve great results." And Willie Lee Buffington is still a student, working his way through Furman University in Greenville, though he is no longer a boy, but a married man in his late twenties, matured by years of struggle and poverty.

The story of his childhood is that of a "poor white," of a farm once owned by his father, of tenancy, of movement from farm to mill, with his schooling seemingly at an end after seven grades in the country school. It was "Uncle Eury" Simpkins, a Negro school teacher, who encouraged him to go on, and who influenced him in so many ways. When he was sixteen, Willie Lee heard of the Martha Berry schools in Georgia, with their opportunities for earning an education. It was there he discovered the wonders of a library. It was there he was filled with a passionate desire somehow to share all that wealth of books and knowl edge with those who had none. There were three years at Berry, with letters from "Uncle Eury" and sometimes a dollar bill, but then came illness, home again, work in the mill, high school at an age when most boys have finished college; and in the midst of it the enchantment of an idea that would not let him go, and that still drives him with unrelenting compulsion to translate it into reality. Perhaps it was his wish to show his appreciation to "Uncle Eury" that made him think of books for Negroes, but it was also a growing realization of racial injustice, and his zeal is the zeal of a missionary.

He had ten cents in his pocket the day he thought of a way to make a start. He bought five postage stamps and wrote five letters to people he imagined might be interested in what he wanted to do. He asked each of the five "for a book"-an old book-for the school. The response was a thousand books from Dr. King's Negro church in New York City! No wonder Willie Lee Buffington's dreams began to soar!

Close to "Uncle Eury's" school, the Negroes from the cotton fields built the first *Faith Cabin Library,* with a lovely big room, a stone fireplace at one end, homemade furniture, a battery radio, a few magazines, new and old, and two thousand books or more on the shelves, with all the undesired weeded out. Children and grown-ups use the library, reading clubs are active, with dues to buy books by Negroes, stories are told, and especially on Sunday afternoon, the library is filled with life.

Since the first unit was finished in 1932, four others have been built in three counties, and at least three communities in the North have this year set themselves the goal of fifteen hundred or two thousand books each to start and maintain new units for which schools are clamoring. As far as the rural Negro is concerned, library means school library. The adults, when they read at all, read what the children bring home from school. A library-bred generation has still to grow up! Even when the service is part of a city system, it is carried on by means of trucks visiting the schools and deposits in the school buildings. When these are fit to house the books! One of the difficulties in the county demonstration was to find schools or homes not too tumbledown to be used as deposit stations! One of the Faith Cabin Libraries is a room in a new and specially planned Rosenwald School building. The others are log cabins on school lands. Two of the schools had lacked only the library requirement to be come accredited. These are of the elementary-secondary type, with eleven grades.

It is surprising to see how the pitfalls have been escaped, which usually beset individualistic efforts to attack big social and educational problems. Perhaps Willie Lee Buffington's tact is the reason for the goodwill of the communities and their readiness to cooperate. He knows the people and the conditions. He knows the feeling of competition between the poor whites and the Negroes. He does not make demands for legislation and new taxes and allotments of public funds; yet his libraries are community projects. Money, logs, rocks for chimney and underpinning, and labor, are all solicited in standard fashion. The Negroes do most of the work themselves, the women upholster barrels for chairs, and altogether they feel that the library is peculiarly theirs. The Negro school superintendent has charge of the libraries after they are built and appoints a managing committee and the teacher-librarian.

Although Willie Lee Buffington looks upon his libraries as missionary in spirit, he has avoided all semblance of denominationalism. His own future is still uncertain, but his great desire is to bring about "a better understanding between the races" there where they live so close to each other, not only through opportunity for the Negro, but by "inviting all Christian people to join in his project." Collecting his books through the churches brings him a certain proportion of religious books, which are so eagerly read. At the same time, appealing to many denominations prevents too great narrowness. Moreover, his contacts with public and college libraries further broaden the character of his collections. Newark, N. J., for instance, and Dartmouth College send him books. He still makes his contacts by the simple means of writing letters personally to friends of friends or to strangers, and asks them for old books and old magazines and pictures, and no money except the prepaid freight. He is not too concerned about the age of the books. He knows the greatness of the need.

Down in the cotton fields are millions of Negroes who can read and have no books to read! Libraries for them are not a charity. They are our response to responsibility. Willie Lee Buffington's log cabin libraries stand, not only as an expression of the faith that made them possible, but of his faith in the mind of the Negro.

A library implies an act of faith
Which generations still in darkness hid Sign in
their night, in witness of the dawn.

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