

Rev. W. L. Buffington, Professor in Paine College, who conceived the Faith Cabin Library plan



W. L. Buffington and his Negro friend - E. W. Simpkins (now deceased)

Libraries in Cabins

By Betty Burleigh *

A NEGRO tenant farmer in South Carolina asked his white landlord if he would donate some trees for the library. "Trees for a library," the astonished man replied. "Are you feeling all right?"

Yes, the tenant was feeling fine. The Negro people were going to have a Faith Cabin Library and they were asking their white friends for trees. They would cut the trees, carry the logs to the saw mill, and build a cabin to house the library. Mister Buffington of Paine College would furnish the books.

The Negro tenant was talking about one of the most unique and useful service projects ever undertaken by an educational institution for Negroes in the South. "Mister Buffington of Paine College" proposed to build a small library by the side of every Negro rural school in Georgia and South Carolina.

The Rev. W. L. Buffington is professor of sociology at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia. In cooperation with him and under his direction 28

Faith Cabin Libraries have been built in isolated communities. The Negroes themselves, built the cabins and their white friends secured "the books."

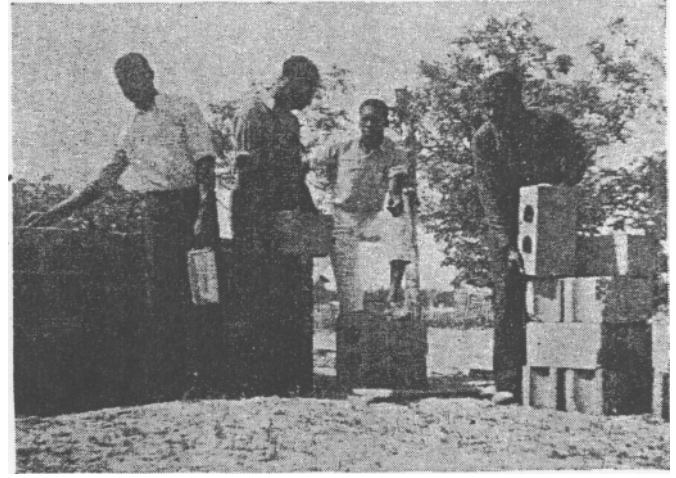
In the section of the country where 20 per cent of the eight million Negroes had no books, the only reading matter many families had was the yellowed newspapers that papered the walls of their drafty houses. Even in some of the schools, one geography book served 30 children. It is for these people that Buffington's libraries stand. Far from the well-traveled roads and miles from power lines, most of them are lighted by kerosene lamps.

Buffington, whose high school education had been nipped in the bud by poverty, was a laborer in an Edgefield, S. C., textile mill when he started the first library in 1932. An old friend, a colored teacher named E. W. Simpkins, invited Buffington to the dedication of a new school building near Saluda, S. C. He went, admired the new two-room building but was distressed to see that the book shelves were

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The first Faith Cabin Library, erected at Saluda, S. C.



Students building the Iowa City Faith Cabin Library at Trenton, S. C.

empty. Remembering his grandmother's advice of "Trust in God and He will help you," Buffington took his last dime and bought five two-cent stamps.

From by-lines in religious magazines he picked at random the names of five ministers. He wrote each of them and asked for, a book. The letters wound up with, "If you can't send a book, please send another stamp so I can write another letter." One went to Rev. L. H. King of St. Mark's Methodist Church in New York City. Although Buffington didn't realize it, St. Mark's is in the heart of Harlem and Dr. King, who is now a Methodist Bishop in Georgia, is himself a Negro.

For two months he heard nothing. And then Dr. King wrote, "Have presented your appeal. Have 800 books on hand and more are coming in each day." The news was a bombshell and the letter itself pleased the unsophisticated mill hand. It was the first airmail he'd ever received.

"In about two months more, 1,000 books came in," Buffington said in a recent interview in New York. "They were packed in barrels and there was no trashy stuff, mostly religious books, text books, biographies and fiction. Mr. Simpkins and I had so many books we didn't know what to do with them because there were far too many for his little school. We piled them into an old open car and drove up to the Saluda County Negro church and stacked the books on the edge of the platform and called a community meeting."

When the Negroes gathered at the church, Simpkins and Buffington said in effect: "Here are books for you. How would you like to build a library for them?" The congregation was enthusiastic.

"Remember this was in the midst of the depression and farm prices had been low since 1920," Buffington explained. "None of us had any money but we decided to ask land owners for trees. The Negroes worked very hard cutting the trees and those who had mules and wagons hauled the logs to the saw-mill. We asked for more trees than we needed and

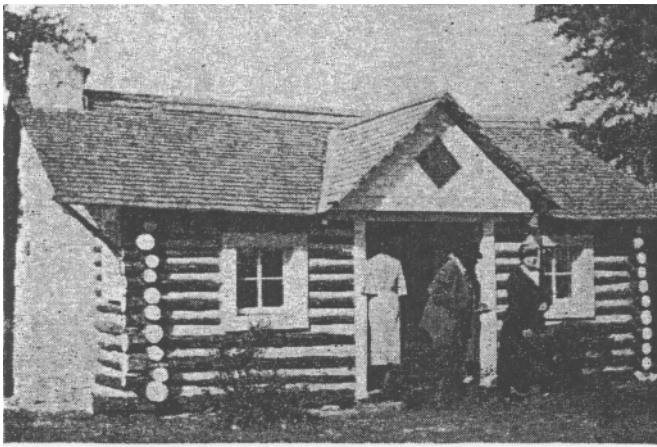
thus paid the mill in lumber. We carted the lumber to the planing mill at Saluda and sold some of it to pay for the planing and to buy sash for windows. There were times when we didn't know where our next window was coming from!"

By the end of the summer this first library stood in a pine grove near Simpkins' school. A log cabin, 18 by 22 feet, it has a rock chimney, a large fireplace and cretonne-covered chairs made of barrels. When the people gathered in their church to give thanks to God for this library, they wondered what to name it. One old woman stood up and said, "We didn't have anything to go on but faith. Let's call it 'Faith Cabin Library.'"

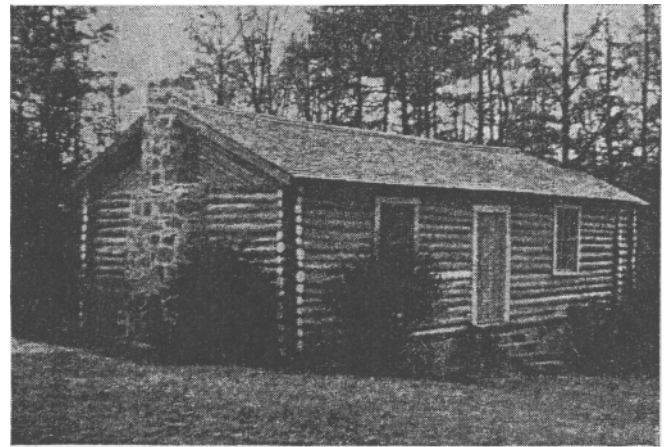
A representative of the state department of education who visited the library was so impressed that he wrote the editor of the *Southern Workman*, a magazine devoted to Negro and Indian life. Readers of this journal sent in enough books to start a second library in Ridge Springs, S. C.

From this beginning the project has mushroomed into the most unusual chain of libraries in the world. Stimulated by his success, Buffington has blossomed into a champion beggar of books. Reading of his project in *Readers' Digest*, a boy in Warsaw, Poland, wrote for books with which he could study English. Buffington has lectured in major cities and has appeared twice on the "Hobby Lobby" radio program. His audiences always respond to his straightforward plea.

Sometimes the Faith Cabin Library bug bites a whole city. After he lectured in Queens, New York City, several years ago, the churches of that borough adopted the slogan, "10,000, books in 10 weeks," and met it! Iowa City, Iowa, started a Faith Cabin Library club and held a community drive for books. All churches, schools and businesses co-operated. Newspapers advertised the drive, books were collected block by block and business firms boxed and shipped the books. Not all of the libraries are made of logs. The Iowa City Unit, located at Bettis Acad



Oberlin Unit, Faith Cabin Library, Seneca, S. C. ' The books were provided by Oberlin College



B. E. Geer Unit, Faith Cabin Library, at the Geer-Rosenwald school, Belton, S. C.

emy, near Edgefield, is made of cement blocks. At Easley, S. C., the Dartmouth Unit, furnished with books from college students and townspeople of Hanover, N. H., is of shingles.

Not all books are gifts of clubs, cities or colleges. Lots of them are from interested persons who have heard or read of the project. He's now piling up books at Paine College for the 29th library.

The professor's main interest in life is the motto on the walls of all his libraries, "Others." No one can top him for sincerity. But it is his extreme modesty, his complete lack of affectation, that disarms everyone he meets. Of medium build, rather on the heavy side, he smoothed his hand over his dark brown hair and said, "The credit is not mine, for it's just as that old Negro woman said, 'We had nothing to go on but faith.' That's what built them all, faith, hard work and the generosity of thousands of people willing to share their books."

A lesser man would not have said as he did, "I come from what they call 'poor white trash.' " Christened "Willie Lee," he lost his mother when he was two and went to live with his grandparents. His grandmother would pat him on his blonde head and say, "Come on, Cotton Top; it's time to read the Bible." These sessions implanted the seed of faith which has guided his life.

When "Cotton Top" was five he moved back with his father, who had married again. Their home was a farm near Saluda where his father eked out a bare living. The tow-headed youngster took a fancy to the tall gangling colored teacher, Simpkins, who took a short cut through the Buffington ton place each day while en route to his school. Unlike most people, the kindly Negro did not laugh when Willie Lee confided, "I want to be a preacher." Simpkins encouraged this ambition.

High school was out of the question at first. He had five sisters and his father needed his help. In 1920 came the boll weevil and ruin. They lost the farm. At fourteen Willie Lee was doing a man's work in the sawmills along with his father. Their

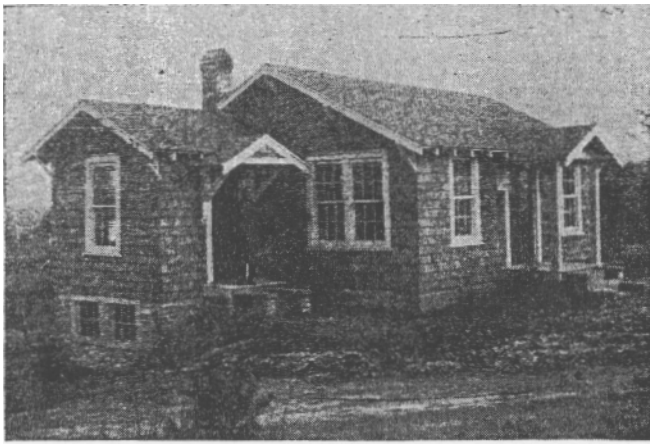
combined income was \$2.50 a day.

After four years of this, he jumped at the chance; to enter Martha Berry School at Rome, Georgia, where students work for their room and board. He arrived there, 300 miles from home, with \$2.80 in his pocket. The dollar a month that Simpkins sent him from his \$40 paycheck seemed like a young fortune. At first Willie Lee spaded a sewer and then changed over to driving a garbage truck. This job pleased him, for in the library trash can he found old magazines and clippings. He carted them off to his room, read them and then cut out stories and pictures and made scrapbooks for his friend Simpkins.' Hearing of this,, the librarian had him transferred, to a desk job in the library. From time to time used books came in. It was the memory of those books that prompted him to write those first five letters, one of which started the Faith Cabin Library chain.

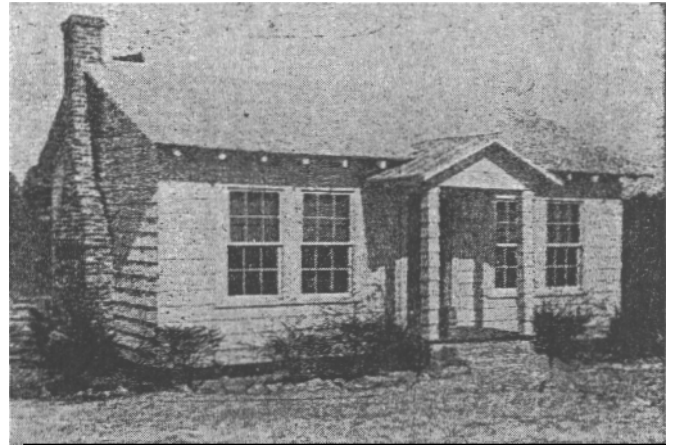
The financial situation at home was so bad that Willie Lee had to leave the school and go home to work in the textile mills. Simpkins kept telling him, "Don't you give up now, Willie Lee. You'll be a minister some day yet." The boy kept his dream alive by teaching a Methodist Sunday school class in Ninety Six, S. C., where the Buffington family then lived.

Buffington married his childhood sweetheart, Miss Clara Rushton, of Saluda, in 1931. "I got a wage cut at the mill the very next week," he commented. When the NRA wangled shorter hours for textile workers, his shift was reduced from eleven to eight hours. This gave him a chance to go to high school in the mornings. He was the father of two children by the time he graduated from the Edgefield, S. C., High School in 1935. By that date three of his libraries were completed. -

Having heard of this ambitious youth indirectly through the "Southern Workman" story, Dr. B. E. Geer, then president of Furman University, invited him to enroll in the Baptist college at Greenville, S. C.



Hanover-Dartmouth Unit, Faith Cabin Library, Easley, S. C. The books were given by Dartmouth College students and friends in Hanover, N. H.



Hobby Lobby Unit, Faith Cabin Library, Lexington, S. C. Books were sent in as a result of a broadcast on the Hobby Lobby radio program

"I had my wife, two kids, and less than fifty dollars when I entered college," Buffington recalled. "The school furnished living quarters, but by the time we got there, there was only one-half of a four-room bungalow left. A senior was living on the other side and we couldn't have the whole house until he graduated. For the first year my wife and I and our two children lived packed in those two rooms. It was like a beehive, with paths between the furniture, but it was a chance to study, and Dr. Geer told me if I couldn't pay the rent until after graduation it would be okay."

During his freshman year he went to Oberlin, Ohio, to speak to the college group there on behalf of his libraries. "Can you imagine a green freshman lecturing to those college professors?" he asked. "I guess I didn't know any better!"

With lantern slides he illustrated his lecture and the audience took this naive southerner right to their hearts. Faculty members and students dug up enough books for him to open the Oberlin unit of the library chain at Seneca, S. C.

After, Furman he entered Crozer Theological Seminary at Chester, Pennsylvania, where he directed religious education in a small Negro church. He traveled around to his libraries as best he could. Then a minister in Connecticut, who heard of his work, gave him an old car. While at Crozer he parked his old "jalopie" in front of a classroom

Editor's Note: WORLD OUTLOOK readers who wish to contribute books should ship them postpaid to "Faith Cabin Libraries, Paine College, Augusta, Ga." A self-addressed envelope or post card should be enclosed.

window. A professor who was conducting a religious philosophy class looked out of the window and spotted the car. He pointed to the car, using it as an example of the illusion in Plato's theory of ideal forms. The students promptly dubbed it "Buffington's Pile of Philosophical Junk." The name still sticks.

By working at a shipyard in Chester during the summer and taking other odd jobs, Buffington supported his family while he earned the B.D. degree from Crozer and the M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania, both in 1942. After that he taught at Benedict College, a Baptist school for Negroes in Columbia, S. C.

One of his best friends was the late Miss Catherine Degan, of New York City, who read of his libraries and his struggle toward the ministry and gave him substantial assistance while he was still in school.

Three years ago Miss Degan attended a funeral. "What a tragedy that all this money spent on flowers couldn't have been given to charity," she remarked to her companions. When she died in 1944, her friends, remembering this statement, gave the money they would otherwise have spent on flowers to Buffington for books. He had already named a library at Pendleton, S. C., after Miss Degan, but he wanted a more permanent memorial than books. So he has started a Catherine Degan Organ Fund at Paine College. When enough checks come in from people who share Miss Degan's views on flowers at funerals, an organ honoring her memory will be placed in the College Chapel.

If you want to learn more about Paine College at Augusta, write for copies of the booklet "Adventure at the South." The total Methodist program among Negroes in this country is found in the booklet, "Methodism Among American Negroes." Both are free. Write to Editorial Department, 150 Fifth Avenue, New York 11, New York.