Roddenbery Memorial Library

In the 1930s the Georgia Library Commission began a number of demonstration projects in rural areas to establish library service to the 114 counties where there had been no libraries previously. The effort was funded by the federal WPA. By 1938 the number of counties without local library service had been reduced to 58, and by 1940 the number was only 16. The Cairo Public Library began on Tuesday, January 3, 1939, under these auspices. Local sponsors and supporters included the Cairo Chamber of Commerce, the City of Cairo, the Cairo Woman's Club, the County Board of Commissioners of Roads and Revenues, and the Board of Education.

Cairo Public Library was first located in an upstairs hallway in City Hall above the fire station. To this day the library logo features a dalmatian or "firehouse dog." The library moved once while in City Hall, and later moved across the street into a larger area which had been a grocery store. In 1964 it became Roddenbery Memorial and moved to its current address at 320 North Broad Street.

The most notable ingredient of the original WPA demonstration library was a capable young lady who had grown up in Cairo and seemed ideally suited to be the keeper of the library. Her name was Wessie Connell, and that name will never be forgotten in the history of Grady County, Georgia. With a keen understanding of the community, its needs, its people, and its influences, she achieved what so many librarians strive for in their careers. She made the library into a benevolent social service that truly improved the quality of life for people in Cairo, and later all across Grady County.

During World War II the Roddenbery family, through the W. B. Roddenbery pickle and syrup company, proposed to make an in-kind gift of a library building. The terms of the donation were spelled out in a 1944 agreement, which also became the local funding agreement for the library. The building was completed in 1964, and the current facility is that same building with an addition that surrounds the library gardens, creating a courtyard.

The library won the John Cotton Dana award for a comprehensive public relations program in a small, rural library four times—all while still in the storefront building. It grew from having just over 100 books in 1939 to a collection of over 60,000 items and a staff of over 20 people, at which level it has thrived in recent years.

A branch library called Oak Reading Center served minority children from 1948 until 1994, when the library reverted to a single facility serving the entire county. Library Clerk Katherine Weston was its longest serving staff member and a major contributor to the wider availability of library service in the community. In 1961 Associate Librarian Barbara Williams wrote *A History of the Cairo Public Library* as a Master's thesis for Florida State University. Much of the material in this article is from her thesis.

The story of Roddenbery Memorial is still largely the story of its beloved Miss Wessie. She died while still serving as the librarian in 1987. The people whose lives she touched still carry their deep appreciation for Miss Wessie and for public library service. As one of the many tributes to her life and career, the staff and public honored her in 1995 by publishing a book of reminiscences entitled, *I Remember Wessie: Thoughts and Stories about Grady County's First Public Librarian.*