Faith Cabin Libraries

In these times of world strife and national defense, it is cheering to note steps that are being taken in the path of expansion of library service, in bringing books to people who never before have had access to them. Such a step is recorded in the growth of the Faith Cabin Libraries.

Faith Cabin Libraries started in 1939 without funds. They grew without funds, until today they have over a hundred thousand volumes in twenty-six units. They are a living example of the power of Christian faith and practice to do practical good in a disordered world.

The founder and present director of this experiment is Willie Lee Buffington, who was a poor mill hand in South Carolina when he conceived the idea of getting books to rural Negroes in the South, where library service to Negroes was non-existent. With the expenditure of ten cents for five stamps he wrote to five people who he believed might be interested in such a service. These letters must have struck a responsive chord somewhere, for one answer alone brought over a thousand volumes. Donations continued to pour in as the idea spread, and in 1932 the first Faith Cabin Library was put into operation on the grounds of the Rosenwald School at Plum Branch, South Carolina.

The various units are all connected with Negro schools, sometimes housed in one of the school rooms, but more often in a separate building on the school grounds, with material and labor donated by the Negro community which it serves. The volunteer services of one of the teachers in each school constitute the only supervision. Books are placed on the hard-worn shelves around the walls in a rough subject classification; cataloging is nonexistent. Very few of the libraries have borrowers' cards, for they do not have the money to supply them. All keep records of some sort, however. There are not enough books in any one unit to warrant extensive circulation records, so these are of the most primitive kind, usually a ledger recording borrower and date, the entry being cancelled when the book is returned. Two-week circulation is the general rule, some units having special seven-day shelves for the more popular books.

One of the chief problems, that of repair, is so far being met by the WPA, which takes the books away to some central place for repairs and returns them. Each individual library has an interesting story behind its foundation. The Oberlin Unit, at Seneca, South Carolina,
for instance, is largely the result of the efforts of the students at Oberlin College in Ohio. Several students heard about Mr. Buffington's program, became interested, and invited him to Oberlin for a discussion on the subject. The result was the establishment of a new unit at the Negro school at Seneca. Similar methods were used by the students of Dartmouth College and the citizens of Hanover, New Hampshire, in founding the Hanover-Dartmouth Unit at Easley, South Carolina.

One of the largest of the various units is the Iowa City Unit at Bettis Academy, near Trenton, South Carolina, which contains over 9,000 volumes. After reading an article by Beatrice Plumb in the December, 1936, issue of the Christian Herald, the Ministerial Association of Iowa City, Iowa, collected 7,000 volumes to start this library. At Lexington, South Carolina, is a Faithful Library, the result of a radio program. The manager of the Hobby Lobby program of NBC asked Mr. Buffington to appear on the program and this Hobby Lobby unit is the result. A single church in Queens Village, New York, started a campaign for ten thousand books in ten weeks, and succeeded. One person alone, hearing of these libraries and becoming interested, made a trip to visit one of them, and coming home to Pennsylvania collected thirty-one hundred volumes for another new unit.

So far all of these libraries are in South Carolina, though Mr. Buffington receives requests for new units almost daily and plans to expand into neighboring states as soon as donations warrant. In addition to serving the children in Negro schools, these twenty-six units are invaluable to the entire population of the communities where they are located. They act as community centers for the social activities of the rural Negroes, as well as libraries proper. It is not possible to fully evaluate the good which results from bringing books to these heretofore bookless communities. Many of the borrowers are slow readers and cannot read many books in a year, yet they do get inspiration and help from those which they are able to read. It seems to the author that this type of service is library service and library expansion where it is needed most, making available good reading matter where none was before, and where the recipients are too poor to furnish it for themselves.

It is the epitome of the oft-heard slogan of the American Library Association, "The best reading for the most people at the least cost."

The establishment of twenty-six libraries in ten years, more than two a year, seems more than sufficient full time work for one individual. When one realizes, however, that the person chiefly responsible for this work, Willie L. Buffington, had had to earn a living for himself, his wife and two children, and in addition has spent nearly seven years in school, this work is a striking example of what can be done when one consecrates himself to a truly worth while project.

To ensure success, Faith Cabin Libraries must keep on expanding. New books are needed to replace worn-out volumes and to establish new units. Some expenses are necessary, gifts in cash for stationery and stamps are always welcome. One of the chief needs today is a good movie camera and projector with which to present visually results already achieved. Any letters, contributions, and suggestions may be sent to Willie L. Buffington, Grover Seminary, Chester, Pennsylvania. All books should be sent to W. W. Buffington, at Edgefield, South Carolina, and transportation should be prepaid.