

Montgomery Libraries Opened Entrancing World

By JUDITH PATTERSON

Once when my daughter was 13 and much enamored of horses, I took her with me to the public library to get a book I wanted. Immediately, I forgot what I came for and began perusing the stacks like Sir Percival looking for the Grail. Moving rapid transit down as many aisles as Beth would tolerate, I picked up books at random, thumbed the thick, porous pages, caressed the hard, enduring covers and inhaled the musty reminder of long-ago pleasures.

Thoroughly bored by the time we left, Beth looked at me with the mock cynicism of adolescent insight. "Mama," she said, "you love a library the way I love a barn."

Though my not-so-bookish offspring have managed to cure me of many of the natural-born introvert's more odious habits, all attempts to curtail their book-addicted mother's compulsive treasure hunting in libraries have failed miserably.

The habit must have taken hold in childhood when beginner's luck turned up such prizes as the "Secret Garden," "Green Mansions" and "Mary Poppins." No matter that those early forays must have produced a hundred rotten eggs for every golden one.

My first library was a converted classroom at Cloverdale Elementary School in Montgomery. In the late 1940s the sleepy state capital that spawned a civil rights revolution in the 1950s and now wears Sun Belt glitter was still an overgrown village clinging to

memories of pre-Confederate glory. It was in that time and place that Mrs. O'Gwynn walked her third-grade class down the hall to the school library and changed my life.

In memory, the room is spacious. All four walls are lined with books. Miss Hall, the ghostly librarian, demands absolute obedience from behind a heavy wooden desk at the front of the room. Long school tables occupy all the space in the middle. We are allowed to look at as many books as we like for as long as we like and then choose one to take home. My response is nothing short of epiphany.

Sunlight falls across the room so bright you can see a million specks of dust floating in the warm air. The musty, ripe-apple smell of small children in a classroom before air conditioning comes simultaneously with the memory of light. Faint with pleasure, I am reading a book about a dog named Chip.

My parents came from two eccentric families, one as self-indulgent as the other is earnest and hardworking. Both liked to read, but neither would have been considered either bookish or intellectual. When my mother was sober enough, she read the cellophane-covered novels she rented from the tiny "lending library" in Amy's Gift Shop. Sometimes when she couldn't sleep at night, my father read the novels to her in bed.

For himself, he read mostly newspapers and magazines, often stopping midsentence to read aloud whatever struck his fancy. Though he had little formal education in ei-

ALABAMA VOICES

ther, he was fascinated by science and technology. I remember one especially zealous attempt to read me a description of the difference between centrifugal and centripetal force — a subject not likely to stir the heart of a 12-year-old already deeply in love with history and fiction.

Because Mama was too ill to get a child off to school the year I was six, I skipped the first grade and taught myself to read. By the end of the year, I had learned to write in a boyish scrawl which — though it never ceased to alarm my teachers — got me into the second grade.

By the end of my third-grade summer, Mama was dead from an overdose of bourbon and morphine, perhaps accidental, perhaps not. In less than a year, Daddy had married a woman with a bedrock belief in physical and social activity for children. For Dot, "reading all the time" belonged to the deadly sin of Sloth, along with solitude and other questionable forms of leisure.

Because we lived on the outskirts of town, I had never seen or heard of a public library

until a schoolmate took me to get the flimsy blue Carnegie Library card that I kept for 20 years. There a series of books called "The Childhood of Famous Americans" gave birth to a life-long love of biography and clear prose. The patriotic little hardbacks fit like a nest of pearls in the hands of a child searching for comforts not to be found at home.

The day I checked out "Jane Addams: Little Lame Girl," Mrs. Stephens, a librarian whose daughter was in my class at school, asked me if I was thinking of becoming a social worker. I was stunned by the question, embarrassed not to know the answer. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" was a question seldom asked a girls in the Deep South in the 1950s. I had never been asked it before.

The question and the suggestion must have lingered somewhere in semi-consciousness when I became a sociology major in college and dabbled in social work before becoming a teacher and writer of biographies myself.

While I was away at college, the public library moved from the old gothic Carnegie to a then-sleek modern building that Beth compared to a barn. When public facilities were desegregated across the South during the 1960s, the chairs in the formerly "whites only" library were removed rather than have black people and white people share the womb-like intimacy of reading side by side in a public building.

The gesture was doomed from the start,

since library lizards are by nature lazy and self-absorbed, totally oblivious to anything that does not impinge on their solitude. Skin color does not impinge. On the other hand, squeaky shoes or sniffles can trigger a riot.

Since those days, I have soaked up the luxurious ambience of hundreds of libraries — from national monuments like the British Library and the Library of Congress to little treasure houses like the Folger-Shakespeare in Washington.

Not long ago, I returned — after 25 years — to pay my regards to the library at Hollins College in Roanoke, Va., where I had been an undergraduate. Big in memory because my time there had been liberating beyond anything I could have imagined, in reality the place is tiny.

On the other hand, I find the library at Cloverdale School doubled in size, consisting now of two converted classrooms. Every inch of space is crammed with books. The long reading tables must have been squeezed out long ago, but sunlight still blasts through a tall row of windows and motes of dust still dance in air.

An authoritarian-looking teacher (math, I suppose) catches me pecking in and asks, "Can I help you with something?"

"No. Not really," I say, "Unless you still have that book about a dog named Chip."

Judith Paterson is a Washington, D.C., writer who teaches journalism at the University of Maryland. She is writing a book about alternatives to the American way of dying.