

BEMIS MEMORIAL LIBRARY, ROBBINSVILLE

On Monday, April 6, 1953, the people of Robbinsville and Graham County held the formal opening of the new Bemis Memorial Library. Dr. Nettie Parrette, Chairman of the Library Fund, presided at the ceremony sponsored jointly by the Graham County Woman's Club and the Graham County Junior Woman's Club. The program featured an address by John Bemis Veach of Asheville, President of the Bemis Hardwood Lumber Company, and concluded with a tea and open house.



Bemis Memorial Library, Robbinsville. New building was formally opened on April 6, 1953. Old Building was used from 1938 to 1953.

Before 1938, there was no public library in Graham County. A small mountain county noted for its bear and wild boar hunting and fine fishing streams, its population of 6,886 was and is thinly scattered. Robbinsville, the county seat and largest community, has today a population of slightly more than 500.

Just fifteen years ago, the first public library in Graham County was opened in Robbinsville. It was housed in a weathered frame building which since the 1880's had known many uses: drug store and doctor's office, general store, dwelling, lawyer's office, shoe shop and cleaning establishment. Seeing it temporarily idle, an energetic and visionary member of the Woman's Club, Miss Belle Slaughter, obtained it as a gift from the Bemis Lumber Company. Stocked with local and WPA books, staffed by a WPA library clerk, renamed by the townspeople the Bemis Memorial Library, this building became the center for the growing local interest in books and reading.

Almost from the beginning, the tiny building was regarded as temporary. As one of the three counties comprising the Nantahala Regional Library, Graham County could draw from a rapidly growing book collection. The size of the building limited shelf space to a crowded 1800 volumes. Kerosene lamps inadequate for evening reading limited the library to daytime hours. There was no water, no rest room. It was a dark, dusty room, difficult to make attractive, a handicap to expanding library service in town and county.

More and more, the library committees of the women's clubs turned from talk of coal and kerosene and curtains to reports on the need for a new building. They invited the regional librarian to explain to them what a modern library could offer in addition to books for borrowing. They discussed among themselves and with their friends the activities and facilities they wanted. Gradually, the chief arguments for a new building took form.

A new library was needed to provide adequate space for books. More books for the people of Robbinsville and then some. Enough so that the regional bookmobile could serve the people of Graham County from Robbinsville instead of replenishing book stock at headquarters in Murphy, spending a third of each Graham County day travelling the 74 miles back and forth over some of the curvingest blacktop road in the state.

A new library was needed to furnish a children's library corner, an inviting setting for story hours and summer reading clubs. When the story hours were started in 1951, the children had to adjourn to the lawn to be comfortable.

A new library was essential if the people of Robbinsville wanted to share fully in the new regional film program. Borrowed equipment was useless in a building without electricity.

The need was clear; the solution to the basic problem of finance was far less certain until two major events shaped the course.

First, Cheoah Properties sold the Joyce Kilmer Inn. Since the old library building had been moved to a corner owned by the Inn, there was grave concern until Cheoah Properties announced that they had withheld this corner plot from the sale and were deeding it to the library.

Then, the president of the Junior Woman's Club asked the executive board of the Bemis Hardwood Lumber Company, principal local industry, to make a contribution toward a new library building. They started the Library Fund by giving her a check: Mrs. L. W. Wilson, Treasurer of the Library Fund, \$5,000. In addition, they offered the services of their company architect, W. W. Dodge of Asheville, to design a building.

Cheoah Properties had made some allowance for a larger building in their gift. But the original was so small that this area measured only 19' by 33'. Designing a library to fit this narrow space posed special problems. Fortunately, Miss Elizabeth House, Secretary and Director, North Carolina Library Commission, was visiting in the Nantahala Region on the day Mr. Veach brought Mr. Dodge to Robbinsville and assisted the librarian in "stretching the lot" to the minimum dimensions required by a building with a 5,000 book capacity.

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As soon as the architect's plans were drawn, a public rally was held in the Graham County Court House. Those attending considered and approved the design with minor changes and organized for a county-wide Library Fund drive. Letters were written to the civic, business, social organizations in the county. On Library Day in Robbinsville, Girl Scouts assisted adult volunteers in their personal appeal for funds. The Junior Women's Club put on a play which raised over \$200 for their special project: furnishing the children's room. At the end of the campaign, a library dinner was held in the school lunch room with food and services donated and tickets sold for \$1 a plate. More than 150 people attended. Bit by bit, the library fund grew to and then passed \$3,000.

The new library dedicated in Robbinsville on April 6 is also a memorial to Mr. and Mrs. H. C. Bemis, co-founders of the Bemis Hardwood Lumber Company. It is another frame building. It could not appropriately be otherwise in Graham County, which has more high grade virgin timber than any other county in the state. There the similarity ends.

The new Bemis Memorial Library is a 22' by 46' building constructed of 10" poplar bevel siding on a solid brick foundation and evaluated at \$12,000. (Labor and lumber contributed by Bemis Lumber Co. and the construction of shelving by students working under the G. I. Bill add greatly to the value.) The walls, ceiling and floor of the interior display the fine native woods of Graham County. The walls and adjustable shelving are of ash; so is the ceiling with its exposed hemlock beams adding strength and beauty. Floors are of beech.

To obtain maximum shelf space at minimum cost in floor space, the side walls were lined with shelving to a height of six feet. The side windows were placed above the shelving, twelve on each side. Like those in the work room and lavatory, all are horizontal gliding Andersen Windows. There are also four double-faced projecting shelving units, two on each side, which partially divide the library room into adult, children's and reference sections. Casters mounted in the bases of these four units permit them to be pushed easily to the wall so the total floor space is available for film programs and other group meetings.

A feature of the building's design worthy of special comment is the large bay window which occupies nearly half the width of the front of the building and provides both light and lure. It is an excellent showcase for any library activity. In time, it will be used for special displays and exhibits. Right now, we can think of no better show than the view it affords of the colorfully decorated children's room. Few passers-by can resist it.

There are two lighting systems in the building. The indirect lights are recessed in shallow wooden troughs just above the side windows. There are also three ornamental metal chandeliers and lamps for the bay window and the entrance. The heating system is a forced air oil burner. Walls and ceilings are well insulated.

Little mention has been made of the work room. Heating system, lavatory, and work room are across the rear width of the building. In the process of construction, both of the other units seemed to encroach on library work space. What remains is little more than a closet equipped with sink, hot and cold running water, and some shelving. Since all book processing is done at regional headquarters, there is no serious problem involved. It will necessitate returning all book mends, etc. to Murphy for repair before recirculating them.

The new Bemis Memorial Library is not completely furnished or stocked. But weekly story hours for pre-school children are already in progress. Film programs will begin as soon as the new projector and screen, gift of Mrs. Arthur Simmons, are received. The library board is making a survey to determine which evening to schedule library hours. The first week in May, the regional library bookmobile begins serving Graham County from the Bemis Memorial Library. It should find time to reach at least one additional community each day of its Graham County week. The new library building seems appropriately dedicated to "the enrichment and enjoyment of the people of Graham County."

Studying this new library, the first in the region in the past thirty years, we've puzzled over the success of library building efforts in Graham County, their lack of success to date in another county in the region. The need for a community library at the county seat is equally as great. The interest in books and reading is perhaps even greater. It has no Bemis Hardwood Lumber Company with its reputation for generosity toward worthy civic projects. But other organizations could be interested in the public relations value of tax-deductible contributions to libraries which produce better informed, better satisfied employees.

We've concluded its time for libraries in the less wealthy, rural areas to rewrite the old saw, "You can't get blood out of a turnip." Obviously, you can't get blood. But you can get minerals and vitamins, elements of good, healthy blood corpuscles. Not every county has money; all have people. The people who want a library can get it. For the one essential ingredient present in the Graham County effort, lacking in the other, is leadership. Responsible, resourceful, leadership. There is potential in every community, every county. What we need are more leaders to develop it.

—PHYLLIS M. SNYDER, *Librarian*
Nantahala Regional Library
Murfreesboro, N. C.



Elbert Ivey Memorial Library in Hickory. The new Library building, with a book capacity of 100,000 volumes was given to the city of Hickory by the family of the late George F. Ivey, as a memorial to Elbert A. Ivey (1900-1942). Of conservative modern design, the \$130,000 building was opened to the public on March 29, 1952. The first birthday was celebrated.