

A Profile: Mollie Huston Lee

by Ray N. Moore

Assistant to the Director

Durham City-County Public Library



Mollie Huston Lee

"If you are a public librarian, you have to be a part of the community. You have to be with the people, find out their wants and needs and supply them the insight to more wholesome life through reading materials." Mollie Huston Lee said it. Mollie is a keen hunter after the varying interests and needs of the public. It is in hunting after the public needs that the librarian builds the library of tomorrow. Mollie Huston Lee has played her role well. She has talents, skills, and resources needed in community development efforts. At the same time she has a stake in these efforts

because of what they can mean in terms of the need for expanded library resources.

Mollie ended her formal career as librarian June 30th of this year. She founded the Richard B. Harrison Public Library of Raleigh, North Carolina in 1935, and was its director until the merger of all Wake County libraries into one system in 1966.

In the weeks since her retirement much has been said in praise of Mollie's work. Something should also be said about the influence her training and experience has had on the younger public librarian locally, in the state, and in the nation. Through bibliographies, exhibits, and directories of local resources, she has increased public awareness of community development by introducing library resources to special groups and individuals. She has applied her skills to community development through author-lecture series, book reviews, group discussions, and many other public information programs for special groups. She has built for the future by working through her professional associations to encourage public and school librarians. She established the first library association in the country for the Black librarian. She has taught library science. Foremost, she has flung herself heart and soul into community development by dreaming, planning, and building a modern \$300,000 library facility. She was secure in the knowledge that what she gave of herself would be multiplied as the Raleigh community increasingly recognized the library as a

powerful ally in efforts to build a better community.

Nor should we overlook the painstaking effort and labor Mollie put forth to establish one of the best special collections of books on Afro-American literature in the nation. The Harrison Library collection on Black literature ranks high among public libraries in its tremendous scope. Through the years Mollie developed new ideas and a variety of methods to increase the growth of this collection which was recently named the MOLLIE HUSTON LEE COLLECTION OF BLACK LITERATURE. Early, she felt there was a need to emphasize books by and about the Negro. "Collections about Blacks were not popular then like they are today," she said. "I felt more people should know about the history, authors, and the contributions of Black people." The life span of a Black publication was two years at best; therefore, Negro books went out of print quickly. It was advantageous for one who collected Black literature to purchase it as soon as possible after publication. Reprints today are often a hundred per cent more. Knowing how valuable these materials were and are today especially, much care was taken in orienting the library patron to the importance and value of protecting the materials while using them.

Mollie Huston Lee was a front-runner among other librarians and teachers of children's literature, including Charlemae Rollins and Virginia Lacy Jones, who were concerned about the image of Negroes as portrayed in children's books. She joined with others in protesting to publishers and asked them to change the types of illustrations and concepts presented in many books such as *PARASOLS IS FOR LADIES* by Elizabeth Ritter. Many publishers became aware of the false stereotypes they were presenting and began to seek the advice and counsel of Black librarians and teachers with reference to more accurate and constructive representations of Negro characters in children's books. Changes in the *EPAMINONDAS* series from the old 1907 edition to the new 1968 edition are

one example of the new outlook publishers have been willing to adopt. Most of the modern approach to interracial books can be attributed to this movement in which concerned Black librarians banded together and forced the issue. Improvements have come gradually. Mollie was in close contact with public librarians in small and remote places throughout the state informing them of what the criteria should be in judging books about Blacks. She spent many hours counseling school librarians concerning representation of the Negro as a natural person.

"Today publishers and writers are very much aware of the importance of illustrations that relate, and most of today's books are delightful," Mollie observed recently. "The Black child is shown in a natural role. Many times the books do not mention the character is black, only the true to life illustrations show it." Books with stereotype portrayals of Blacks are harmful not only to the Black child's self-image but to white children as well.

The Harrison Library has a special collection by and about Blacks for children and young adults. The purpose of it was to allow students and interested people to evaluate and have access to children and young peoples' books published throughout the years, and if necessary to make a comparative study of the advancement of Negro literature.

According to Mollie, several recent children's books have generated new controversies. For example, *HARRIET AND THE PROMISED LAND*, a children's book dealing with Black history, has highly sophisticated art work. The book uses lovely colors, but its pictures of Blacks are highly stylized with bony skulls and grotesquely large hands and feet. Some librarians have rejected the book. Adults think it's a beautiful book but the children do not take to it.

Still another book which has provoked controversy is *OH LORD, I WISH I WAS A BUZZARD*, by Polly Greenberg. The illustrations of the Blacks in the book are attrac-

tive but the choice of the buzzard has offended many adults. Mollie does not consider the use of this particular bird as representative of a Black child's dream. But in this case the children have loved the book and apparently find no difference between a buzzard and a bluebird.

Over and above her work as public librarian she assumed the job of part-time supervisor of school libraries on a voluntary basis. Mollie went to the schools on her lunch hour to strengthen their libraries and to train teachers to look after the libraries. "I was so dedicated," she said, "that I wanted to extend my services to needs of the local community. Money was not the issue. They gave me the title without pay." Before the recent changes in the Raleigh schools she supervised the remodeling of Washington High School and assisted with planning the building of

Lucile Hunter and Oberlin Road schools. From this involvement there came two advantages. It enabled the public library to supplement the school book collection and it allowed the two agencies to keep informed about each other's programs.

On the state level she was the first Black state public library supervisor. In this role she traveled throughout the state establishing and improving Black public libraries. She persuaded bookmobiles to stop at community stops which were predominantly Black and which drew Negroes to the scene.

Notable development of public library facilities for Negroes began about 1939. This was due largely to the WPA library program, state aid, community pride and interest, and the North Carolina State Library Commission which enthusiastically

Joseph Ruzicka, Inc.

911 NORTHRIDGE ST.
P. O. BOX 21568
GREENSBORO, N. C. 27420

PROUDLY ANNOUNCES

TEMPLOK

Our new TEMPLOK storage binder in 10 sizes locks periodicals in and maintains them in an orderly sequence until you decide on binding permanently, placing the material on microfilm, or discarding the material because it is no longer current. The best part is that you can remove material, change the information on the spine label and reuse your TEMPLOK binder. All of this for just a little more than the cost of binding permanently.

Write us for further information.

Dept. TNC

encouraged the establishment of public libraries.

In an article entitled "Development of Negro libraries in North Carolina," which appeared in the May 1944 issue of *NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARIES* Mollie wrote that there were thirty-three public libraries in the state. Charlotte was the oldest which opened to the public in 1905. Durham Colored Library, presently the Stanford L. Warren branch of Durham City-County Library, was second on the scene in 1913. Five of the public libraries were housed in buildings of their own, eight were connected with schools, and twenty were in rented property or community centers. Durham, Greensboro, Raleigh and Wilmington were independent libraries.

In 1941, the General Assembly passed a bill for state aid to public libraries providing for an appropriation of \$100,000 annually. The amount was increased in 1943. One important sentence in the bill read: "The fund shall be used to improve, stimulate, increase and equalize public library service to the people of the whole state." There are no statistics available which indicate what percent of the money was earmarked for Negro libraries. At that time Durham, Hertford and Wake received one-third of the amount appropriated for counties. The remainder of the libraries received \$10 to \$25 per month. Twenty-seven counties were allocated \$50 for the purchase of books.

In 1939, Negroes in Hertford County were the first to own and operate a bookmobile. In 1942, Durham's Stanford L. Warren Public Library was the only other library for Negroes which owned its bookmobile. In Wake County the bookmobile was purchased for the use of both Negroes and whites. Blacks in Davidson, Gaston, Rockingham, Cherokee, and Johnston counties had access to bookmobiles which were served by white librarians.

Mollie was a part of this notable growth of public libraries for Blacks. Because of her vital interest in the field, she kept a

good staff at the Harrison Library with little turnover. The staff was able to grow and to learn the techniques of librarianship. She was able to make friends with her associates in Raleigh, throughout the state, and at the North Carolina State Library.

Her loyalty to the profession caused her to found the first Negro librarian's association in the country in 1934. To be a part of any white organization at that time was unheard of in the Deep South. Twenty-six librarians attended that first meeting, and at the end of the decade in 1944 there were 200 at the annual meeting. In the beginning Mollie was at the helm of the association, the establishment of which marked a definite step toward progress of Negroes in the library field, state-wide and nationally. The North Carolina Negro Library Association dissolved at its annual meeting at Charlotte in 1954 after a life of twenty years, because two associations in a state could not hold chapter membership in the American Library Association. Over a period of twenty years the North Carolina Negro Library Association gave the young Black librarian the privilege of being a part of and participating in the programs of the profession. He had a chance to learn and to know something of the responsibility of an administrative role. Since 1954, it has been customary for a Black librarian to be nominated for second vice-president in the North Carolina Library Association. This writer has not heard of a Black librarian being nominated for first vice-president, an officer who normally moves on to the office of president. Even Mollie with all her training and experience never reached the office of second vice-president in NCLA.

Mollie's swan song and recent honor on the state level was her appointment to the Board of Trustees of the North Carolina State Library by Governor Robert W. Scott.

Perhaps the most productive years of Mollie's life have been the past thirty-three, the period of time this writer has known her. It was during these years that

many Black writers were developing their thoughts and ideas and putting them into books. It was the time following the period of the "New Negro" of the 1920's, and it referred to more than the writers who were then active in that sudden flowering in literature called the Negro Renaissance. Claude McKay, author of *IF WE MUST DIE*, best describes this period in his writings. Alain Locke describes this new spirit as a renewal of "self-respect and self-dependence." Men like W. E. B. DuBois, one of the greatest scholars in history, crossed every field of knowledge in his writings and inspired a greater self-assertiveness in his people. The literary legacy DuBois left the Negro has a relevancy to social change and revolution not only for Blacks in America but for the colored peoples of the world. Negro writers found new strength in their own folk culture. The Negro Renaissance was essentially a period of self-discovery marked by a sudden growth of interest in things Negro.

There were problems for the Negro writer. In the first place, Negro books at that time were considered by some editors and publishers as exotic. Negro material was placed into a certain classification like Chinese material or East Indian material. Magazine editors would say: "We can use but so many Negro stories a year" (that "so many" meaning very few). Publishers would say: "We already have one Negro novel on our list this fall."

The market for Negro writers was definitely limited as long as they wrote about themselves. The more truthfully they wrote about the Negro, the more limited the market became. Those novels about Blacks that sold best were almost always books that touched lightly upon the facts of Negro life—books that made our Black ghettos in the big cities seem very happy places indeed, and our plantations in the Deep South idyllic in their pastoral loveliness. When Black writers chose to tell the story of the Negro like it was, the books did not sell and soon went out of print.

Mollie kept up with those writers making history. Through her extensive personal

contacts she was able to bring them to the North Carolina Negro Library Association's annual meetings and to the Raleigh community. Mollie was associated with such outstanding authors as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, Arthur A. Schomburg, Alain L. Locke, Peter Abrahams, J. Saunders Redding, Arna Bontemps, E. Franklinrazier, Rayford W. Logan, Zora Neale Hurston, Jesse Jackson (children's and young adults author), Richard Wright, and many other authors as well as outstanding Black librarians.

The writers depended on Mollie for encouragement and she was one individual who served as a pilot to place them before the eyes of the public. She made it possible for librarians to hear these distinguished writers. The authors themselves looked to her for guidance and for publicity for their books. This was an unforgettable strong point in Mollie's relationship with Black librarians and Negro writers.

She encouraged people in Raleigh and Wake County, such as Charles R. Frazer and John R. Larkins, who had the knowledge and ability to write the history and to describe achievements of Black people in the community.

Other individuals were expressing their feelings in song, dance, and the theater. Marian Anderson sang before a tremendous audience in front of the Lincoln statue. The all powerful *NATIVE SON* by Richard Wright was born. "It is not surprising that this novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American literature has yet had, comparable only to Dostoevski's revelation of human misery in wrongdoing." Dorothy Canfield Fisher said it in her introduction to the novel. "The author of this book, as has no other American writer, wrestles with utter sincerity with the Dostoevski subject—a human soul in hell because it is sick with a deadly spiritual sickness."

Arna Wendell Bontemps in correspondence with Mollie concerning *NATIVE SON*

said: "It seems to me a mighty piece of narrative art, but I wonder seriously about the after-effect. White readers, including Wright's party comrades and close friends, tell me it engenders anti-Negro feelings. I suspect this will be the case, especially among the great number of unsophisticated readers to whom it is going."

J. Saunders Redding produced *NO DAY OF TRIUMPH* which was awarded the Mayflower Cup in 1943. Mollie immediately secured his services to tell the people about the award as he stopped by the library soon after the presentation.

The 1950's were turbulent and repressive but some of the best Negro thoughts of the times came out of these years and to the forefront. Equality in education, accommodations, and employment began. The great ruling from the Supreme Court swept the nation. There was a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History. Right around home in Durham, M. Hugh Thompson and John Hervey Wheeler won their first case "separate but equal." William H. Brown, Daniel Eric Moore and J. Rupert Picott compiled all the statistics they could secure for reference in the school case. Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes continued to collaborate. Mollie Huston Lee was among a list of 59 national and state leaders heard at the 63rd session of the Virginia Teacher's Association on the theme, "Global Thinking." Some of the leaders including Mollie were John Hope Franklin who was at that time visiting professor at Harvard University, and is now John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor of History at Chicago University. He spoke on "Global Education at the Grass Roots." Pearl Buck, world famous authoress and Nobel award winner opened the first session with "Toward the Global World." Mollie discussed "Heart of Global Teaching." *THE BIG SEA, FATHER AND SON, NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER, SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM, THE WAYS OF WHITE FOLKS* and *SIMPLE SPEAKS HIS MIND* were being published in a dozen or more foreign countries such as Poland,

Spain, Italy, Britain, Portugal, France, Sweden, and India.

TIME MAGAZINE featured Thurgood Marshall in one of its September issues and said: "In the bright, lush September of 1955, in a day of confidence-as in a time of despair-the central problems of United States whites and Negroes again blended into one: How to shape law, government, customs, practices, schools, factories, unions and farms in ways more consistent with man's nature and man's hopes. How, within the enduring framework of United States society, to let one change call forth another in some reasonably harmonious order. . . . After all, the very most we can hope for is complete political, economical and social equality with the white man."

Like the rest of Black America, Negroes of Monroe, North Carolina were awakening. The first segregated public facility integrated was the Union County Library. Negroes demonstrated they were capable of defending themselves. Fifteen thousand students and faculty members at a Rotterdam, Holland, Catholic School signed a petition calling for the freedom of two young boys not even teenagers in the Monroe "Kissing Case." Much of the real truth of these happenings was a total blackout in the white press throughout the nation. However, the KKK got the message, and their raids and rallies ended.

Harvard University Press published John Hope Franklin's *MILITANT SOUTH*. The bus boycott began in Montgomery, Alabama. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was the first federal civil rights legislation since 1875. Mollie Huston Lee was a part of this movement in her work to better libraries and forward the profession in the interest of Black librarians. She made history while history was making her.

Well before the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the case which established the legal precedence for the unconstitutionality of discrimination in public libraries and other public facilities, desegregation had begun taking place in libraries. However, library segregation is still widespread in much of

the deep South and particularly in smaller cities and rural areas.

Mollie Huston Lee made her impression at the national level in the field of librarianship as well as on the local and state levels. The North Carolina Negro Library Association sent her as its chapter representative to the American Library Association Council and in 1944 Mollie was the second Negro elected at large to the Council. She was preceded in 1943 by Eliza Atkins Gleason, author of *THE SOUTHERN NEGRO AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY*, a study of the government and administration of public library service to Negroes in the South. The adoption of the Third Activities Committee Report in 1939 and the subsequent reorganization structure of American Library Association had made Mollie's appointment to Council possible.

A. P. Marshall speaks of this particular time when the American Library Association "was engrossed with international activities, strengthening libraries, and laying the foundation for federal aid." "Only occasionally," he said, "were there faint reminders that libraries needed to give attention to the educational needs of all people".

It was in Kingston, Jamaica, BWI September 22, 1955 that Peter Abrahams, author of *MINE BOY* was contacted by Alfred A. Knopf's publicity director concerning his first visit to United States. He also asked Abrahams to see if he could arrange to speak at the twentieth anniversary celebration of Richard B. Harrison Public Library as Mollie had requested. Peter Abrahams came for traveling expenses to Raleigh, was housed by Mollie's friends, and was given a small honorarium. In the meantime she wanted to share Peter Abrahams with friends and associates. Mollie extended the invitation and the Stanford L. Warren Public Library in Durham planned a public program. The Warren Library program was an overwhelming success. The auditorium had an overflow of forty per cent Blacks and sixty per cent whites when Peter Abrahams spoke.

Surely Mollie was aware, as many Negroes were, that Blacks needed to communicate both among themselves and with peoples of the world. Only through Black writers would the world learn about the problems of Blacks, about their sufferings, about their joys and about their dreams. Mollie Lee was determined, tenacious, and tough under crucial conditions to swing with the tide of the times.

Then came the revolting Sixties and the "IN" movements. Four students from North Carolina A. & T. College started the sit-in movement at Greensboro's five and dime store. Twenty Negro and white students staged kneel-in demonstrations in white churches in Atlanta. The jail-in movement started in Rock Hill, South Carolina when students refused to pay fines and requested jail sentences. The wade-in demonstration occurred at Rainbow Beach, Chicago. The spirit of revolt caught fire throughout the nation and leadership was baffled. Dogs, police brutality, and busing all brought out feelings of Blacks and whites.

Adam Clayton Powell became chairman of the powerful Education and Labor Committee of the House of Representative. Many times since, it has been stated, he put through more constructive legislation for the nation than any other individual. He was a powerful individual in his time regardless of the press giving more attention to the lighter side of his life. At the recent ALA meeting in Chicago this writer listened to a speaker praise Powell's strength as chairman of the committee and what his forcefulness had meant to the country. The speaker was discussing a portion of the ALA theme: "Media: Man-Material-Machine."

President John F. Kennedy told the nation in his historic radio-television address that segregation was morally wrong and that it was "time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative body and above all, in all of our daily lives."

More than 250,000 persons participated in the March on Washington demonstration, and Tent City grew up over night in Washington.

The growing frustration of Blacks was brought out with dramatic force by the explosion of the Watts ghetto in August 1965. "Burn, baby, Burn" became the catch phrase of similar outbursts across the nation. By mid 1967, with Detroit ablaze and smoke from the Newark ghetto blackening the skyscrapers of Manhattan, curfews in Baltimore, Washington, Raleigh and Durham, the nation was in a revolt unlikely to be settled at a small price. Assassination grew. John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King were followed by Robert F. Kennedy. The loss of these and other skillful individuals made a nation think. The scars remain unhealed.

The great unrest of youth in the 60's was of concern to all individuals in places of authority. The influx and surge of large numbers to the public library was due to the lack of strong school libraries. Teachers were studying and doing more research than ever before. They gave students more outside work in assignments, and this caused problems for the public librarian. The problem began to ease as school libraries participated in federal aid programs from the state level. The wide use of copying machines also helped to discourage mutilation of books and periodicals which became a common occurrence in the public library.

At the beginning of stronger integration of schools about 1964, and more strongly in the 70's and the introduction of Black literature courses, the public library had little to spend on Black Studies. However, it was forced to strengthen materials in this area. The inclusiveness of the Harrison Library's Black collection kept Mollie and staff busy in developing bibliographies on Black Studies. In 1957, Mollie compiled a bibliography, *BOOKS BY AND ABOUT*

NEGROES; 1950-56, which reflected the holdings of the Harrison Library's Negro collection. Later she compiled a supplement for the years 1957-66. This bibliography has not been printed. However, it was reproduced by Duke University in the summer of 1968 and circulated to 100 individuals attending a National Endowment for the Humanities Workshop on the materials of Negro culture at the university.

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Mollie received the A. B. degree from Howard University and the B.S.L.S. from the Columbia University School of Library Service. She was the first Black librarian at Shaw University from 1930-35. She taught Library Science at Atlanta University and North Carolina Central University in the summers of 1938 and 1939 respectively. Other honors bestowed on her included: honorary membership in the Association of North Carolina High School Library Clubs; election to "Raleigh Woman of the Year" for outstanding service in the field of Adult Education 1954; a citation in *WILSON LIBRARY BULLETIN* as one of the six most distinguished Negro librarians in the country 1955; and inclusions in *WHO'S WHO OF AMERICAN WOMEN; WHO'S WHO IN LIBRARY SERVICE; WHO'S WHO IN THE SOUTHEAST; WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA*. She is the author of "Securing the Branch Library" which appeared in *OPPORTUNITY* magazine; co-author of "Public Library Service for North Carolina Negroes," in *LIBRARIES OF NORTH CAROLINA*; author of "North Carolina Negro Library Association 1934-54," in *LIBRARY SERVICE REVIEW*; compiler of *BOOKS BY AND ABOUT THE NEGRO 1950-56*; compiler of unpublished *BOOKS BY AND ABOUT THE NEGRO 1957-66*; author of "Aging Without Fear" in *ALA ADULT SERVICES DIVISION NEWSLETTER*, 1971. She has contributed articles and

book reviews to a number of newspapers and periodicals including the *LIBRARY JOURNAL*, *PHYLON*, and *ALA ADULT SERVICES DIVISION NEWSLETTER*.

Mollie was the first Negro to receive a scholarship from the Columbia University School of Library Service. She was also supervisor of the Delta Public Library in Louisburg, North Carolina and Tar Heel of the Week 1971.

Mollie Huston Lee is the widow of the late James S. Lee, former chairman of the Biology Department of North Carolina Central University. She is the mother of James S. Lee, Jr. who is co-ordinator of Rural Development Project with the Durham Foundation for Community Development. James Lee has recently completed a proposal for a rural land project which is for co-op farming for Black people. James and his lovely wife Valeria make their home in Greensboro with their two sons, Marc 10 and Malik 3. Both James and Valeria are graduates of North Carolina State University in Raleigh. After the family chores Valeria spends her extra time as a volunteer community worker.

A state official, describing Mollie's 40 years of work in North Carolina observed recently: "It would be hard to overestimate Mrs. Lee's influence on the library profession in general and particularly in school and public libraries in this state. Her achievement is the more remarkable because she not only often had to face unenlightened and sometimes hostile groups of administrators, but she also had to overcome the indifference and inertia of many people who should have known better in the first place. While the new building (occupied in 1968) which houses her third library is a fine example of her genius for planning and executing modern library

designs, her real influence has been in the minds and hearts of countless children and adults who have had new intellectual and cultural avenues opened up for them through her tireless efforts to bring the library to the people who need it."

Productive planning, tremendous personal association and contacts with librarians, distinguished authors, important international figures and publishers kept the Harrison Library far out front. It is significant how skilled and successful Mollie was in her bargaining to initiate new ideas, to attract eminent people with qualities of excellence to the Harrison Library—a sizable branch library in North Carolina but by national standards comparable to a small public library. She knew in the beginning what the cost would be. It was a painful, persistent sort of way of working over and above the requirement. Yet at the same time Mollie was proving that a Black librarian, even under harsh conditions, could rise up and challenge any librarian in the country. Who has done more to encourage and promote Black librarians in the profession than she?

COLONIAL "out-of-print" BOOK SERVICE, INC.

Specialists in supplying the out-of-print books as listed in all Library Indices (Granger Poetry; Essay and General Literature; Shaw; Standard; Fiction; Biography; Lamont Catalogue; Speech, B. C. L., etc.)

**WANT LISTS INVITED
CATALOGS ON REQUEST
23 EAST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK 3, N. Y.**