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Florida Library History Project

Emily Taber Public Library, a member of the New River Public Library Cooperative

Friends of the Emily Taber Public Library
by Michael Hedrick McCollum
1997

Many years ago in a rural area called Macclenny a woman named Emily Taber had a vision for her grandchildren's future. She wanted to provide every opportunity for their academic advancement. She saw the need for a public library in her community.

Mrs. Taber realized she could not see this dream into reality without the help and support of the people of Macclenny. The community support for Mrs. Taber came in the form of an organization called Friends of the Library. Together they met and surpassed their original goals. In the late 1930's amid the great depression, the government had programs set up so the populous could continue to work even though the wages were very low. One of these programs was assisting the set up of libraries in rural areas. The attempted library in Macclenny, Florida had little success at that time, but set the stage for success in the future.

In the year 1961 Emily Taber decided it was time for Baker County to have a library. She had been a part of the group that tried to start a library in the 1930's. During high school her children had problems doing any kind of extra study or research because to get any information they had to travel to Jacksonville. Mrs. Taber vowed her grandchildren would have no such problems. In the summer of 1961, Mrs. Taber and some like-minded friends met at the Lake City Howard Johnson's for coffee and discussed how to accomplish this goal. First, there had to be a building and then the women had to procure books for the building. To compound the issue, the ladies had to work on a very tight budget because they had very little money. The library was a room in the local Episcopal Church in which Mrs. Taber was a member. She filled it with about 625 books given to her through donations ranging from the Jacksonville high society to her local pastor. Mrs. Taber said , "Give me your books, not your money." (Taber interview) The

local press gave her scrapes of paper and free advertisement. Barnett Bank also contributed to Mrs. Taber's efforts by giving her old envelopes to use as book pockets. She learned to catalogue books from a friend in the Jacksonville library system. Within a year the library outgrew the church and had to move into a larger store front on U.S. 90 in downtown Macclenny where it spent the next three years. Sometime in the mid 1960's the opportunity arose for the library to take over the old county courthouse. To this day, the library resides in this location.

In 1983, Peggy McCollum became head librarian at the Emily Taber Public Library where she had worked and volunteered for a few years prior. Very soon after Mrs. McCollum came into this position the county commissioners called her into their office . The commissioners informed Mrs. McCollum that her annual budget was to be \$5,000 , the use of the building and she could run the library with volunteer help. This was not enough money to pay the light bill for a year. This is one of the biggest problems a small town library faces. To politicians , funding a rural public library is way down on the list of important election promises. "When cutting wasteful spending the library looked to be an easy and uncontroversial target," said Mrs. McCollum. Instead of cowering to the pressure of the establishment she called Friends to action. Mrs. McCollum held a library board meeting and a meeting with the library staff and Friends. They decided to take the commissioners on. The name and phone numbers of the commissioners were put to paper and given to all the patrons of the library. The commissioners had a budget workshop but so many people showed up they had to reschedule the meeting to deal with just the library problem. The week prior to the meeting the commissioners didn't get a moments rest. When the night of the meeting arrived it was held in the courthouse and there was standing room only. Citizens of Macclenny and patrons of the library were allowed to stand up and speak their minds. Speeches ranged from how angry the speaker was to compelling statements on how important the library was in fighting illiteracy in Baker County. The meeting was a victory for the library and the friends The budget was even higher than Mrs. McCollum originally asked for.

In 1983, the friends in Macclenny became an officially recognized group called The Friends of the Emily Taber Public Library. The most important thing the Friends did in the few years after it was established was to get the library put on the National Register as a Historical Landmark. This was important for two reasons. It preserved a part of history as well as set the stage for fundraising and grant applications later. Instead of applying for a grant on just the basis of being a

library it also held Historical value as well. In the 1980's when the library building had turned 80 years old it became apparent that fixer up projects were not going to do anymore. A major restoration was going to be needed. A restoration was going to take a lot of money and it had to come from sources other than the local government. Mrs. McCollum started to inquire about the state grants that were available. The problem she found with the grants were that the requesting library had to raise what is called match of support money before a grant application would even be looked at. In this case \$25,000 had to be raised in order to get the grant of about \$100,000. It seemed like a lofty goal but Mrs. McCollum and the Friends took up the challenge.

Mrs. McCollum and the Friends came up with all kinds of fundraising ideas. In an interview Mrs. McCollum was quoted as saying: "We did everything except stand on the comer and sell ourselves and that is only because our husbands wouldn't let us."

One of the fundraiser ideas was a series of fashion shows the Friends put on. The fashion shows were held at Mrs. McCollum's home. The Friends served a light dinner and area businesses loaned clothes that were modeled by local young ladies. It took about eight years to raise the money needed. In that time the Friends put on about four such fashion shows and many other fundraisers. In the end Mrs. McCollum and the Friends were able to raise the money needed to complete the restoration.

Whether it be on a local, state, or federal level, Friends of the Library are an invaluable part of keeping a library functioning in a community. They can help save it from destruction or just keep the shelves stocked with up to date books. Together with the schools they make up the defense against illiteracy in this country and throughout the world.