

Oak Grove Public Library

According to the U. S. Census, the population of Lamar County grew by 28.4 percent from 1990 to 2000. Just prior to the opening of the Oak Grove Public Library, the estimated population was 41,957, and half of this number resided in the Oak Grove Community. The nearest public libraries were located in Purvis, Sumrall or Hattiesburg. Former Lamar County Library System Director (1997-2003), Stella Wheat, recognized immediately that “20,000 people were being under-served by public libraries.”

In 1999 a \$20 million state bond issue to improve libraries passed the state legislature. The Mississippi Library Commission announced grant opportunities for library construction, repairs, furniture, and equipment. Stella Wheat and former County Planner, Alana Abney wrote grants totaling \$560,000. The \$500,000 grant funds were used for construction, and the other \$60,000 funds were to purchase furniture and equipment. As Mrs. Wheat’s vision spread, a Building Committee and Friends Group were established. The Mississippi Library Commission, Board of Supervisors, Board of Trustees, Building Committee, and Friends of the Oak Grove Public Library worked diligently to make the dream of a public library for the Oak Grove Community a reality. Sixty percent of the building funds were provided by taxpayers, and the Board of Supervisors provided 40 percent matching funds. Money was also donated by private individuals and obtained through Friends group fundraising efforts (Engraved Bricks Project).

Stella Wheat, Alana Abney, and Lynn Walker (Landry and Lewis Architects, PA) traveled to several Public libraries throughout South Mississippi to gather design ideas. In November 2001 the land for the library was cleared and Landry and Lewis Architects prepared building plans. Instead of a traditional groundbreaking ceremony, a time capsule was placed in the front entrance (April 10, 2003). Items placed inside the time capsule include: a letter from Governor Ronnie Musgrove, a bestsellers list, photographs, Oak Grove High School memorabilia, and art work created by Oak Grove Lower Elementary School kindergartner, Bradley Deleon. The engraved stone covering the capsule reads: “*Library—Here is where people, one frequently finds, lower their voices and raise their minds.*” --Richard Armour, Poet. The capsule was provided by the Building Committee and is scheduled to be opened in the year 2028.

The 7,000 square foot facility was completed in October of 2003. While design elements from several public libraries were used, the Oak Grove Branch is unique because it draws upon the region’s railroad history. The outside and inside (high ceiling over the Circulation Desk) of the building were designed to resemble a train depot. The entry has wrought-iron signs like those seen on an old train platform. The high “clestory” windows were copied from the Collins Public Library. The Children’s Room east wall has a colorful mural depicting a scene from the story *The Little Engine that Could*. Local artist and University of Southern Mississippi graduate, Kelly Stanford, painted the mural. The building’s support columns serve as “express stations”—library users can access the System’s collection via the Internet.

Opening Day Collection and Staff

Many hours and careful thought were devoted to selecting materials and appropriate staff for the new library. The Oak Grove library opened with close to 10,000 items and four

full-time and three part-time employees. Again, this could not have been possible without the support of the Lamar County Board of Supervisors and Trustees, as they approved and provided additional financial support to: 1) ensure proper selection and processing of new materials, 2) allow key staff the opportunity to work with the Building Committee, 3) establish procedure and develop children's services, and 4) provide training. The Mississippi Library Commission should also be recognized, as materials were donated from their collection as well.

Grand Opening and ribbon-cutting ceremonies took place on Saturday, November 8, 2003. Activities included an unveiling of the Children's Room mural. Professional actor, Gary Grubbs and his wife, and Dr. and Mrs. Aubrey K. Lucas read stories to children. Drawings were held throughout the day for door prizes donated by Oak Grove Community businesses. Since the opening, the library receives an average of 2,000 visits per month and averages 3,000 during June (Summer Reading). The Library is open 49.5 hours per week. Upon celebration of its two-year anniversary in 2005, the first phase of the Friend's original fund-raiser, *Educational Enrichment Brick Project*, was completed. Engraved, decorative bricks honoring local residents and businesses were placed around the flagpole. This ongoing project continues to provide financial support towards library services and resources.

Lamar County Board of Supervisors: Mike Backstrom, Ben Barrett, Joe Bryant, Jerry Hanberry, Wayne Hale.

County Planner: Alana Abney.

County Administrator: George M. Fries, III

Lamar County Library System Board of Trustees: Virgie Chastain, Patsy Davis, Barbara Green, Birdie Jenkins, Dorothy Lott.

Building Committee: Virgie Chastain, Sherry Underwood, Birdie Jenkins, Peggy Moore, Alisa St. Amant, Stella Wheat, Dr. Thomas Walker, Dr. Antonio Rodriguez-Buckingham.

Lamar County Library System Director: Stella Wheat

Oak Grove Public Library Staff: Alisa St. Amant, Marsha Hester, Judy Shelton, Tammy Lees, Michael Eichier, Betty McGehee, Kent Ford.

Friends of the Oak Grove Public Library Board Members: Peggy Moore, Pat Yelverton, Catherine Merrikin, Carroll Hegwood, Penny Kochtitzky, Allene Korinek.

Architects: Landry and Lewis, PA

General Contractor: Piercon, Inc.

(Information provided by Alisa St. Amant, Stella Wheat)