

Museum News: Terrell County Public library

by CW (Bill) Smith, Curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

Newcomers arrive in Sanderson to find a full service public library in a modern, attractive building, and marvel that a town this size should possess such a fine public facility. The generations who have grown up with the library don't remember what it was like in the "old" days when the only library available was at the public school.

Being a rural community, reading always has been a big pastime with our citizens. With no entertainment to speak of, folks read books, magazines, newspapers...anything they could get their hands on. That was in the day of "no television" and almost everyone could read.

By the 1930s, the literacy rate in the United States was closing in on 95 percent. However, as a certified Reading Specialist with a Master's Degree in Reading, I can tell you, sadly, that we are nowhere near that level now. According to the latest figures, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read. That gives us an 86 percent literacy rate. Of those who read, 21 percent of the adults read below 5th grade level. Even more shocking, 19 percent of high school graduates are functionally illiterate! As my adviser and chief reading professor Al Tucker at Sul Ross often asked, "I wonder how they achieved that 95 percent literacy rate then, but now, with all our research and advances in the teaching of reading, we are struggling to match their results...and failing!" Rest in peace, Doc, I'm glad you can't see what's happening now.

In Sanderson, however, the community valued the education of its children. From the beginning it provided the best facilities and the best teachers that it could procure, and as a consequence, the level of achievement and proficiency in Sanderson was and is very high. We have some of the most successful students in our area, if not the state. Much of that goes back to providing the best materials for study and research, i.e., the libraries in our schools.

Of course the citizens of Sanderson and Terrell County have always had the privilege of using our excellent school libraries, but because of age limitations, appropriateness of reading materials and the level of complexity of certain subjects for our youth, a complete and extensive library was not available or even appropriate at the schools. In other words, the reading selections were limited for those wishing to go beyond basics, study certain upper level subjects or just enjoy a trashy romance novel.

In the 1960s, the school librarian Margaret Farley saw a need and called a group of ladies to her home to discuss creating a public library in Sanderson. With the backing of the Culture Club, the indomitable Margaret and her brigade approached the County Commissioners and requested that a space be set aside in the Court House for a small library and that money be earmarked for a part-time employee. To the ladies' surprise, the Commissioners agreed. Of course, government entities require accountability and the Commissioners asked for a quarterly report to tell them how many books were being checked out and the number of patrons using the library. Work was begun immediately using books the El Paso Public Library had obtained by government assistance.

The first quarterly report delighted everyone and impressed the Commissioners. The library was a roaring success, and as months turned into years, the library holdings grew until the jury room upstairs was bursting at the seams. By the 1970s the space was filled and the library was looking for a new home. Sadly, there was no decent space suitable in town for a larger library and no money for renovation or new construction, or so they thought.

At this time, Sid and Mary Frances Harkins, along with their children, son Monty and Lisa Harkins and daughter Sidney Louise Dickson and children Cotton, Lincoln and Destiny, began to look for a way to do something special for Terrell County. They felt that building the library was the best way to serve all the citizens, and so, the building project began.

After months of construction under the plans of designer Buster McKenzie, the building was completed in June of 1973. Transfer of books, materials and equipment from the second floor of the Court House was completed by July. The new, fully equipped library was inaugurated with a gala reception on Sunday, July 21, 1973. Shortly before the reception began, the Harkins family and close friends met at the library to hold a short dedicatory prayer service led by the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, the Reverend David Marx.

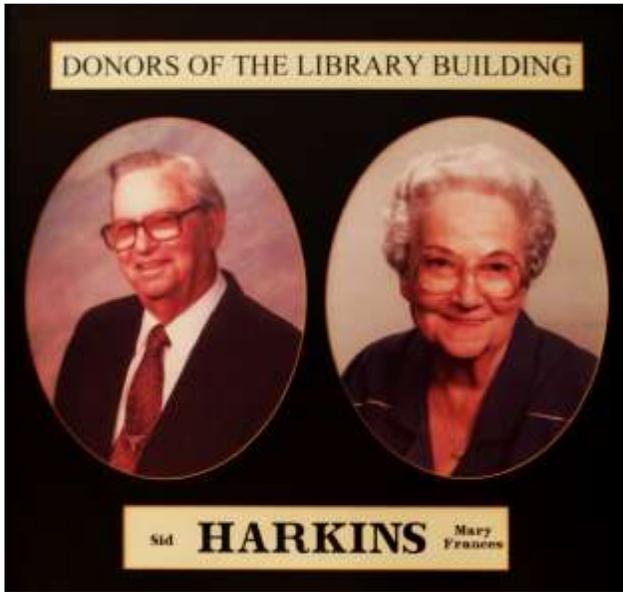
The Harkins presented a plaque to be affixed to the exterior of the building with the following inscription: "By the Grace of God this library is given in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Monty Corder, Mr. and Mrs. Cecil Arvin, Mrs. Mary E. Mitchell, Harry Hale Harkins and in appreciation of Jack Hayre."

Mr. and Mrs. Monty Corder were the parents of Mary Frances Harkins. Mrs. Cecil Arvin and Mrs. Mary E. Mitchell were sisters of Monty Corder. Harry Hale Harkins was a nephew of Sid and Mary Frances, who died at an early age in a tragic accident. The irrepressible Jack Hayre was a longtime friend of the Harkins and former county attorney and ex-county judge of Terrell County. He was instrumental in assisting the efforts to build the library, and Mr. Harkins, in an open letter to the public explaining the contribution of the people listed on the plaque, jokingly had this to say about Jack Hayre: "We thought for awhile that we would be compelled to dispose of Jack Hayre, so that we could get his name on (the plaque,) but we liked it better this way."

Today, our library is fully accredited and a member of the Texas State Library system. We are affiliated with the regional library in El Paso and the interlibrary loan system. As of 2013 our holdings included approximately 27,110 printed materials, 247 audio materials, 1,212 videos and access to 50 licensed computer databases. We had 520 registered borrowers and visitors made 7,424 annual visits. There were 13,171 circulation transactions, of which 1,300 were for kid's materials. That is a pretty good record for a community of 983 persons.

Though Sid and Mary Frances Harkins have passed on to their just eternal reward, their library...our library...stands as an icon of love, dedication and hard work on the part of those who created it and to those who maintain it. Their love for reading and desire to provide an excellent reading experience for the citizens of Terrell County is greatly appreciated.

But, a word of caution: as always, if you don't use it, you will lose it. Support your local library!



Photos courtesy of Terrell County Public Library