



Meet Mrs. Bettie Harris, Belle Glade Librarian (1946-1966)

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It has been a year since I became the new Research Librarian for the Belle Glade Branch of the Palm Beach County Library System. One of my professional six-month goals is to complete a digitization project in order to help preserve the local history of our library. This includes scanning photos, internal documents, newspaper articles, library advisory board minutes, etc., and making sure they are keyword-searchable so that they may be digitally accessible to staff and, ultimately, the public.

An Unidentified Black and White Photo

During my digitization process, I came across a nostalgic black and white Belle Glade Branch library photo from the 1960s with no other identifying information. It was a picture of a Caucasian librarian surrounded by Black children in an outdoor library event. She has a warm smile and the children appear to be having a good time. This may seem like a normal Tuesday for libraries today; however, this is historically significant in 1960s. During this time, library sit-ins were being staged in Birmingham, Alabama¹; Memphis, Tennessee²; Jackson, Mississippi³ and other U.S. cities in order to peacefully protest segregated libraries. Black Americans were arrested simply for sitting at library tables traditionally reserved for whites. Within certain counties in Louisiana, "Negroes with (library) cards stamped with 'Negro' were permitted to borrow books only from a



1960s, Belle Librarian Bettie Harris with Children/ Photo credit: Belle Glade Branch library archives

bookmobile and were prohibited even from borrowing in the library itself.⁴ In order to better understand the cultural tone of the era, a local 1962 newspaper article interviewed the Belle Glade City Manager, Royce W. Owens who boasted that "Belle Glade now has a Negro civic center with ball fields and swimming pool near a neat, clean community in the southwest end of the city."⁵ That civic center is now the current location of the Belle Glade Branch library. After scanning several letters of correspondence from the library and then cross-referencing the names and dates on Newspapers.com, I discovered the librarian featured in the unidentified black and white photo is Mrs. Bettie W. Harris. (Local newspaper articles spelled her

¹"Library Sit-In," *The Tampa Tribune*, April 12, 1963, 11-A, accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/330364489/?terms=negroes%20defiant%20ala.%20court%20fight&match=1>.

²"New Demonstrations in Memphis," *The Jackson Sun*, March 22, 1960, 1. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/282624086/?terms=Jackson%20Public%20Library%20sit-in&match=1>.

³"Library 9 Case Set," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 11, 1961, 7. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/180052437/?terms=library%20sit&match=1>.

⁴"Court Reverses Sit-in cases," *The Palm Beach Post*, February 24, 1966, A20. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/134476968/?terms=Court%20Reverses%20Sit-In%20Cases&match=1>.

⁵Bill Antill, "City of Black Gold Based on Farm Economy," *The Palm Beach Post*, April 29, 1962, 13. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/133659988>.

first name, "Betty" with a "y".) During this time, the library would submit "Use Your Library" ads in the local newspaper featuring quotes in order to promote their collection, such as this one for biographies: "The best teachers of humanity are the lives of great men." With your indulgence, I would like to highlight the life of a great woman.

In the early 1960s, the Belle Glade Library inhabited a renovated house next to a police station.⁶ It was also the clubhouse for the Belle Glade Women's Club. In 1961, the library was open six days per week and Mrs. Harris was the only librarian.⁷ The library board eventually approved an additional relief librarian so that Mrs. Harris could have Mondays off.⁸ After being in charge of the library for 14 years, the library board petitioned the city manager to raise Mrs. Harris' salary to \$325 per month.⁹ Put into perspective, the cost of a first class postage stamp in 1962 was only \$0.04 and the maximum fine for a library book was \$0.50.

Building a New Desegregated Library

In 1963, Congress was debating the Library Services and Construction Act (H.R. 4879) in order to increase federal funds to help establish or improve library service to all areas, regardless of population. Justifications included accelerated demands on public libraries with higher educational and reading levels of the general population. The median age of public library buildings in 1962 was estimated to be 53 years, 29% were built before 1901.¹⁰

On February 24, 1965, the Palm Beach Post highlighted the overcrowded and outmoded Belle Glade Library building. The book allotment budget for the library in 1965 was only \$125 per month, which was significantly larger than the \$25 a month budget when Mrs. Harris began as a librarian 17 years earlier.¹¹ The library's 12,000 volumes of books covered just about all of the floor space in the building. Children's section books had to be stacked high above any child's reach and half of the reading table was used for storing files.¹² The community was growing and libraries were becoming desegregated. Bettie Harris and the Belle Glade Women's Club were instrumental in raising money to open a new Belle Glade library on June 27, 1967.¹³ To make the building possible, the city borrowed \$80,000 from the Bank of Belle Glade. Tax funds from the sale of cigarettes were used to ensure the loan.¹⁴ The Palm Beach Post celebrated Mrs. Harris for helping everyone, from the neighborhood children to an inmate in the city jail.¹⁵ Her favorite

"customers" were the children. On August 7, 1966, the newspaper reported that Mrs. Harris could remember children's names, even when they come back to visit after several years.

I would like to amend the old library newspaper ad and suggest that "the best teachers of humanity are the lives of great public servants." In a time where Blacks were (and still are) fighting for civil rights, this unidentified photo buried in a library shoebox and articles from the 1960s suggest that Mrs. Bettie Harris was a public servant ahead of her time. Not only did she help expand the Belle Glade Public Library to meet the needs of a growing community, but she also served everyone, including children, inmates, and minorities who have been historically marginalized in our society. I feel it is no small task to provide great public service by reinforcing the commitment to provide equal library access to all as we strive to connect communities, inspire thought, and enrich lives.

The Laymen of the World

In closing, I would like to leave you with a quote I scanned from Mrs. Harris' Library Annual Report on October 1, 1965: "The relationship of the layman to libraries is of more than casual importance. Libraries are not just another 'worthy cause'. They are the foundations upon which education rests, and education is one of the two forces which can yet save the world. The contents of libraries and the use made of them will play a critical part in the history of the next few years, for the use of libraries, if it is made at all, will be made by those who determine the fate of mankind – the laymen of the world."¹⁶



Belle Glade Branch library music event/ Photo credit: Belle Glade Branch library archives

⁶Jane Young, "Belle Glade's Mrs. Harris Knows Books, Borrowers," *The Palm Beach Post*, August 7, 1966, C-5. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/130005266/?terms=Belle%20Glade%27s%20Mrs.%20Harris%20Knows%20Books%2C%20Borrowers&match=1>.

⁷Alice M. Close to Thomas Dreier, February 8, 1961, Belle Glade Branch collection, Palm Beach County Library System.

⁸Royce W. Owens to Dorothy Jones, August 1, 1961, Belle Glade Branch collection, Palm Beach County Library System.

⁹Alice M. Close to Royce Owens, June 21, 1962, Belle Glade Branch collection, Palm Beach County Library System.

¹⁰U.S. Congress, *Summary of Public Library Legislation under Consideration by Congress*, HR 4879 and S 580, Title IV, Part C, December 16, 1963, Belle Glade Branch collection, Palm Beach County Library System.

¹¹John Van Gieson, "Size Puts Library in a Bind," *The Miami Herald*, September 20, 1965, 1-C. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/621889237>.

¹²Van Gieson, "Size Puts Library in a Bind," 1-C.

¹³L.J. Margolis, "New library branch will feature extra space, art," *The Palm Beach Post*, November 17, 2011, 11. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/163620403/?terms=New%20library%20branch%20will%20feature%20extra%20space%2C%20art&match=1>.

¹⁴Iz Nachman, "Belle Glade's New Library Will Officially Open Today," *The Palm Beach Post*, June 27, 1967, 7. Accessed July 1, 2021. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/134758522/?terms=Belle%20Glade%27s%20new%20library%20will%20officially%20open%20today&match=1>.

¹⁵Young, "Belle Glade's Mrs. Harris Knows Books, Borrowers," C-5.

¹⁶Bettie W. Harris, *Narrative Report*, October 1, 1965, Belle Glade Branch collection, Palm Beach County Library System.