



• *Librarian*

Wessie Gertrude Connell

1915–1987

Inducted 2002

Wessie Connell took her desire to make a difference and anchored it firmly in her hometown of Cairo, Georgia. As a young girl, she took her doctor's advice to become a librarian so that she could work in a quiet environment in which to continue convalescence from an illness. The quiet didn't last long as she quickly embarked on a personal ambassadorship to all the school children of Grady County to expose them to the wonders of books.

In 1939, under a Depression-inspired Works Progress Administration program, Wessie became Cairo's first librarian. Starting off in a room above the town's fire department, "Miss Wessie" only had 110 books. This petite young woman also had a fiery determination to reach young people with the joy of reading and soon she began to figure out ways to reach those so she desperately sought.

When the library ran out of books, Wessie would tell the children stories to keep them interested while she waited for stock to be returned. That was the beginning of library story time. Schoolrooms, businesses, general stores and filling stations across the country became branch libraries. She got dedicated black families to keep small collections of books available in their homes for loan since segregation precluded their routine use of the library. She was a pioneer of the "outreach" approach to libraries that has now become standard in the U.S.

Wessie later moved the library across the street into a tiny building. It was crammed to the walls, with almost no area to walk. This determined woman took her mission as seriously as if she was president of a corporation. Her goal was to see the library reside in a grand building with plenty of space for people to browse, study and hold meetings.

During her struggles to make the library a strong, solid part of her beloved home community, Wessie used her innovative mind to fill needs, probably not realizing she was making history with her unique ideas. Those ideas included story-time, branch libraries and other outreach programs. Her awards were numerous, starting with the very first "Citizen of the Year" Award from the Kiwanis

Club of Cairo in 1948. She went on to be designated a "Top Flight Woman" from the Business and Professional Women's Clubs of Georgia in 1952 and "Woman of the Year" by the Grady County Civic Clubs in 1960, along with the Award of Merit from the Garden Clubs of Georgia in 1961. She worked well and effectively with the Georgia, Southeastern and American Library Associations. She was involved with the Library Public Relations Council and the Georgia Adult Education Council. But as Wessie once said to a magazine reporter, "People don't love you for your awards. They love you when they can do something nice for you."

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– Wessie Gertrude Connell

Wessie's fierce determination eventually resulted in that new library she wanted so badly. The

sons and grandsons of local pickle magnate Walter Blair Roddenbery donated \$185,000 in 1964 to build a grand new facility in his memory and honor. Wessie toyed with the idea of moving on- maybe even out of state- but she soon realized that she was still needed. So she stayed and continued to provide her wide range of library services that ranged from activities around the civil rights movement to a party for Cairo residents 75 years and older to a celebration of the anniversary of Beatrix Potter's "Peter Rabbit."

"Miss Wessie" may not have lived in exotic places, but her dedicated work made a huge difference in Cairo and all over the country. She was a visionary who brought the world to the children and adults in her hometown and county. For her dedication, innovative methods and consistent determination to bring the joy of reading to her community through the development of a first class library system, Wessie Connell is honored as a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

Additional Resources

Roddenbery Memorial Library

320 North Broad St.
Cairo, GA 39828
(229) 377-3632