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SC Library Spotlight - Oconee County Public Library

Blair Hinson

Oconee County Public Library

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Abstract

Spotlight article on the Oconee County Public Library system.

Keywords

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SC LIBRARY SPOTLIGHT

Oconee County Public Library

"I'm Philip Cheney, from Oconee County, the wild and wooly west of South Carolina." That's the usual way our director introduces himself at the bi-monthly meetings of the South Carolina Association of Public Library Administrators. Oconee County is, in fact, the western-most county in South Carolina, located in the northwest corner of the state, and the northern half of the county is wooly, with mountainous terrain, waterfalls, and the Sumter National Forest. Founded in 1948, the Oconee County Public Library serves over 75,000 residents of Oconee County via four library facilities (Walhalla, Seneca, Westminster and Salem), one bookmobile, five Little Free Libraries in the Mountain Rest community, and since March of this year, two Wi-Fi hotspots, one located in the Mountain Rest Community Club and the other in the Long Creek Community Building.

Close proximity to Clemson University, which is located just across the county line in Pickens County, provides access to excellent employees. OCPL not only recruits part-time employees for its Seneca branch from Clemson University, but two of its seven professional employees, Blair Hinson, Branch Services Librarian, and Stacie Powell, Youth Services Librarian, have undergraduate degrees from Clemson. Tri-County Technical College, with campuses in Pickens County and Anderson County, also furnishes employees for the library. Natural resources like the lakes and mountains also attract talented retirees to the area as well. The

OCPL's Board of Trustees reflects that, boasting a public defender, a retired captain in

the U.S. Coast Guard, a retired Coca-Cola worldwide marketing executive, a banker, a retired pediatric nurse, a retired guidance counselor from the public schools, a media specialist in one of the local high schools, a retiree from a local insurance agency, and a former CIA employee.

The mountains and remote areas of Oconee County also present challenges. The library is often the ONLY outlet for reliable Internet access in Oconee County. Even for those with means, Internet access is often hard to come by, or is prohibitively expensive. In order to create a more stable Internet backbone, the county undertook a project to build a fiber optic network for "middle mile" Internet access using a Federal ARRA grant (Stimulus). The library system became a key player in helping to lessen the "digital divide," not only by providing truly high speed Internet access at all library branches using the newly created fiber optic network, but also by partnering with Oconee

FOCUS (the agency in charge of the fiber optic network) to provide Wi-Fi access to previously unserved areas of the county at two community centers, one in Long Creek, and the other in Mountain Rest.

Like many counties in South Carolina, Oconee County appreciates its history. The OCPL owns the copyrights to several valuable sources

on local history, such as *German Colony Protocol: minutes of the German Colonization Society*, and had those digitized and made



Trude Heller, widow of former Greenville Mayor Max Heller, discussing the Holocaust at the Westminster Library

available at the South Carolina Digital Library. The OCPL was also the first library in the state to take advantage of the State Library's Digitization in a Box Initiative, an equipment loan program, to digitize books, pamphlets and other documents which deal with some aspect of the history of Oconee County. Most were works by local authors which were originally published in very small editions and are no longer available for sale in a print version. See <http://digital.tcl.sc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collec tion/oconee> and <http://scmemory.org/institutions/oconee-county-public-library/>.

In a small county like Oconee, with a limited staff and budget, maintaining four branches and a bookmobile would be a real challenge without our volunteers. For the last two years in a row, the VIP (or "Volunteers Increase Potential") program has won the Governor's Volunteer Award for Direct Service Volunteers. In 2013, the award went to Ann Rogers for her work with genealogy in the South Carolina room, and in 2014, the award went to Jean Snellings for her work with the bookmobile. Without our volunteers, having genealogy



OCPL's bookmobile with Bookmobile manager Brenda Lee and students at the Walhalla Elementary School

information available for patrons, such as newspaper and cemetery indexes, or running the bookmobile, wouldn't even be possible.

The OCPL has also undertaken some special projects in recent years that expanded our reach beyond the walls of our building. In spring, 2011, the OCPL played host to a national Smithsonian Institution Museum on Main Street traveling exhibit entitled "New



Science Saturday in the lobby of the Walhalla Library with library volunteer Cohleen Vassey and students

Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music." That exhibit also led to a partnership with the Oconee Heritage Center for a companion exhibit on local radio. In 2011, the OCPL applied for and was awarded an LSTA grant from the State Library for "HOLA: Hispanic Outreach for Library Awareness," a program designed to introduce the library to the large Hispanic community in Oconee County. In 2012, the OCPL was again awarded an LSTA grant for an "Improved Staff Training Program," the results of which were presented in a poster session at the South Carolina Library Association annual conference in Greenville, SC in 2013. In 2014, Youth Services Librarian Stacie Powell applied for and was awarded an LSTA grant for a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) summer camp, to be held in summer, 2015, at the Walhalla Library. The grant also provided for two telescopes that the library loans out for patron use. Ms. Powell has also created a "Science

Saturdays" program, partnering with the Clemson University Life Sciences Outreach Center.

The OCPL is definitely in the "wild and wooly" west of the state, but our programs and services are really keeping us in touch with our rural community, and making the library relevant for many years to come.

Blair Hinson, Branch Services Librarian, Oconee County Public Library