

## Virgia Brocks-Shedd, Poet and Librarian

Born in Carpenter, Mississippi, in 1943, Virgia Brocks-Shedd boarded at the Piney Woods Country Life School, about 25 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi, from the age of thirteen. At this young age, she developed a love of literature and poetry, reading hundreds of books from the school library, including *The Negro Caravan*, an extensive anthology of Black writers, and crediting Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* for the motivation to achieve her goals.<sup>1</sup>

At Piney Woods, she also first heard readings by Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, a famous Black Mississippi poet who won the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1941 for the collection *For My People*.<sup>2</sup> This early encounter inspired an interest in poetry for Brocks-Shedd. So, when she attended Jackson State University, she eagerly studied under Alexander, who was a professor there.<sup>3</sup> The two developed a long friendship that lasted until Brocks-Shedd's passing in 1992.

In a eulogy titled "A Love Letter to Virgia Brocks-Shedd," Alexander recounts their first meeting at her literature class, describing Brocks-Shedd as "bright-eyed and eager to learn – thirsting for knowledge – drinking in every word."<sup>4</sup> Brocks-Shedd earned a BS in Language Arts

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence W. Hunter, "Mississippi's Library Heritage: Virgia Brocks-Shedd," *Mississippi Libraries* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Yale Series of Younger Poets, Past Winners, accessed September 6, 2021, <http://youngerpoets.yupnet.org/past-winners/>

<sup>3</sup> Virgia Brocks-Shedd, "Mississippi Authors Award: 1989 Non-Fiction Winner: Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander," *Mississippi Libraries* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 103.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Walker Alexander, "A Love Letter to Virgia Brocks-Shedd, 12, December 1992," Margaret Walker Personal Papers [AF012], Series I: Correspondence, 1940's-1998, n.d. Margaret Walker Center, Jackson State University JSU Box 17008, Jackson, Mississippi 39217-0108

at Jackson State University in 1964 and her MSLS from Atlanta University, a historically Black college, a year later.<sup>5</sup>

After library school, she returned to Jackson, Mississippi, and began work as an assistant librarian for Tougaloo College's L. Zenobia Coleman Library, spending most of her career there. As a librarian and archivist at the Coleman Library, Brocks-Shedd would create a repository of southern, especially civil rights, history, act as a mentor for students, and nurturer of life in the artistic community as a poet and performer. While at the library, she started the Tougaloo Civil Rights Collection, some of which is currently housed in the Mississippi State Archives under a 2004 agreement between the State and the College for cataloging, processing, and conservation of the material.<sup>6</sup>

The collection holds records of famous members of Mississippi civil rights history, including an archive of the Tougaloo Nine, a group of nine students from the historically black private college who staged Jackson's first sit-in at the city's public library in 1961. At the time of the agreement, the repository housed more than 700 cubic feet of material in thirty-nine different collections.<sup>7</sup>

Of the collection's holdings on Fannie Lou Hamer, Billie Jean Young, a southern actress and artist who worked with Brocks-Shedd in the Southern Women's Rural Network -- an organization dedicated to uplifting southern women in education, healthcare, and economic realities -- credits the librarian and friend who collected "Hamer memorabilia" for helping her get her project off the ground. "Her help was invaluable: films, boxes of information, news clippings, and so on. So, it was a perfect place to start," she said of the project, which became

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<sup>5</sup> Clarence W. Hunter, "Mississippi's Library Heritage," 19.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Phillips, "A Civil Rights Collection is Preserved," *Mississippi Libraries* 70, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 92 – 93.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, "A Civil Rights Collection is Preserved," 92.

the one-woman show, “*Fannie Lou Hamer: This Little Light of Mine*,” which Young first performed at Tougaloo College.<sup>8</sup>

In her professional career, Brocks-Shedd was also active in the Mississippi Library Association (MLA) when the state was emerging from a long history of segregation. At the MLA, she was a trailblazer “from the day that the walls of segregation and exclusion were torn down,” wrote Clarence W. Hunter, librarian at Tougaloo, in a history of the MLA’s slow integration of Black librarians for the organization’s fall 1992 newsletter.<sup>9</sup>

According to Hunter, before 1967, Black librarians in the MLA were not given the right to full membership in the state’s local chapter of the American Library Association. When ALA mandated they integrate, the group severed ties with the parent organization in 1963 and quietly rejoined ALA again in 1966.<sup>10</sup>

After this period, the organization’s newsletters show a change as news of libraries at historically Black colleges are mentioned in the journal. Jackson State College and Tougaloo Library news began appearing under its academic news section. The articles featured stories of Black Studies programs hosted by librarians, exhibits at their libraries, recent acquisitions, and complete articles on notable Black librarians, like Ruby Stutts Lyells, the first professionally trained Black librarian in Mississippi, and Ernestine Lipscomb, head of the library at Jackson State University.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Billie Jean Young, “This Little Light of Mine: Dramatizing the Life of Fannie Lou Hamer,” in *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, eds. Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 131 – 144.

<sup>9</sup> Clarence Hunter, “The Integration of the Mississippi Library Association,” *Mississippi Libraries* 56, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 68 – 71.

<sup>10</sup> Hunter, “The Integration of the Mississippi Library Association,” 70.

<sup>11</sup> “It’s What’s Happening and to Whom: Buildings and Honorary Degrees,” *Mississippi Library News* 32, no. 4 (December 1968): 210; Ernestine Lipscomb, “Black Studies Workshop Presents Authors,” *Mississippi Library News* 35, no. 3 (September 1971): 165-166; “Ernestine Lipscomb Retires,” *Mississippi Library News* 40, no. 4 (December 1976): 226.

Brocks-Shedd attended the first integrated meeting of the association<sup>12</sup> and maintained an active role in MLA committees in the 1970s, appearing on the association roster of groups from education to long-range planning.<sup>13</sup> In addition, she was also a founding member of both the Mississippi Archivists and the African American Librarians Caucus of Mississippi and a charter member of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.<sup>14</sup>

In 1978, she participated in the Association of College and Research Libraries' Mellon Internship program, spending six months at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts to learn library management skills.<sup>15</sup> After this internship, she moved into a new position as director of Special Collections<sup>16</sup> and would later head the library from 1985 to 1991.

"Throughout her life as a librarian, she was concerned about the need to preserve materials that are primary documents for cultural and social history," wrote Jerry W Ward, Jr., English professor at Tougaloo, colleague, and mentor, in the *Jackson Advocate* upon her passing. In addition, she was concerned "about the need to build very strong collections of African American materials, and especially about the need to use the library in the education of young people and as an invaluable resource for adults."<sup>17</sup>

Her work in the local artistic community is prolific. In fact, according to the collection notes of the fourteen boxes of Brocks-Shedd's papers held at the Civil Rights collection at the

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<sup>12</sup> Virgia Brocks-Shedd, "Mississippi Authors Award: 1989 Non-Fiction Winner: Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander," *Mississippi Libraries* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 103.

<sup>13</sup> Her name appeared regularly in *Mississippi Library News* and *Mississippi Libraries* listings of committee members from in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>14</sup> Clarence W. Hunter, "Mississippi's Library Heritage: Virgia Brocks-Shedd," *Mississippi Libraries* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 19.

<sup>15</sup> Casper L. Jordan & Beverly P. Lynch, "ACRL's Historically Black College & Universities Libraries Projects, 1972 – 1994," in *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries, and Black Librarianship*, ed. John Mark Tucker, (Champaign, IL: Publications Office, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1998), 156 – 166. Internet Archive.

<sup>16</sup> Hampton Williams, "V.B., Poet," *Mississippi Libraries* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 75.

<sup>17</sup> Jerry W. Ward, Jr., "Love's Poet," *Jackson Advocate*, December 10 – 16, 1992.

Mississippi State Archives in Jackson, half consist of her professional work at the college library, and the other half of her work as an artist.<sup>18</sup> Both roles would intersect throughout her career from the beginning. For example, she worked at Tougaloo's Coleman Library when fellow librarian and writer Audre Lorde taught there in 1966 and later studied poetry under Alice Walker, a poet in residence there in 1970.<sup>19</sup>

In the book *Black Life in Mississippi: Essays on Political, Social and Cultural Studies in a Deep South State*, Julius E. Thompson lists Brocks-Shedd, along with her mentor Alexander, in a lineage of black poets from Mississippi. In a short biographical note included as an appendix to the book, Brocks-Shedd mentioned her interest in poetry began in the mid-50s and that she was influenced by her teacher Margaret Walker. She told Thompson in a letter; her poetry considers "man's ethical relationships with each other on earth," and love, both spiritual and mental. Mentioning she felt Black poetry was "one of the best avenues for airing personal disgust or grievances."<sup>20</sup>

Her professional and artistic roles crossed in the summer of 1980 when she made a debut in the MLA newsletter *Mississippi Libraries*. The article described her dual career as a professional archivist librarian and poet, "an artist par excellence who uses her poetry as a testimony of love and loving," wrote Hampton Williams, in the article titled, "V.B., Poet."

Williams continues: "Her verse moves at liberty from the free-flowing style to the more strict

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<sup>18</sup> "Brocks-Shedd, Virgia, papers, 1965 – 1993," Mississippi Department of Archives and History, accessed September 6, 2021, [http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=103139&query\\_desc=su%2Cwrdl%3A%20virgia%20brocks%20shedd](http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=103139&query_desc=su%2Cwrdl%3A%20virgia%20brocks%20shedd)

<sup>19</sup> "Contributors," *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 3, *Poetry*, ed. Dorothy Abbott, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 386.

<sup>20</sup> Virgia Brocks-Shedd, "Brocks-Shedd, Virgia" in Julius E. Thompson, *Black Life in Mississippi: Essays on Political, Social and Cultural Studies in a Deep South State*, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2001), 226-227.

rhythm and rhyme – a mark of true artistic growth which is becoming more recognized as she continues to write prolifically,”<sup>21</sup>

During the 1980s, Brocks-Shedd published poetry in magazines, the chapbooks *Mississippi Woods* and *Earth Works*, and the *Jackson Advocate* newspaper. Her poems have a solid Black identity and a strong sense of place, according to the article “Black Southerners, Shared Experience and Place.”<sup>22</sup> For example, in her much-anthologized poem,<sup>23</sup> “Southern Roads/City Pavements,” she uses the repetition of the title of southern roads to express a speaker’s life rooted in the south, its environment, and customs:

*Southern Roads,*

You've paved a permanence in my life,

for I am bounded by gentle southern spirits

That travel you, too, and still,

(Virgia Brocks-Shedd, “Southern Roads/City Pavement”)<sup>24</sup>

A thorough review of the fourteen boxes of Brocks-Shedd's papers, thirteen of which are available to view at Mississippi State Archives, would illuminate more on her motivations to write and includes some unpublished work.<sup>25</sup> It would also inspire more on her work as a

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<sup>21</sup>Hampton Williams, “V.B., Poet,” *Mississippi Libraries* 44, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 75.

<sup>22</sup> Jimmie Lewis Franklin, “Black Southerners, Shared Experience, and Place: A Reflection,” *The Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 1, (Feb 1994): 3- 18.

<sup>23</sup> The poem has appeared in the anthologies *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, Vol. III: Poetry*, ed. Dorothy Abbott, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988) 42 - 46 and in *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry*, ed. Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: Mentor, 1997), 484 – 489.

<sup>24</sup> Virgia Brocks-Shedd, “Southern Roads/City Pavement,” in *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, Vol. III: Poetry*, ed. Dorothy Abbott, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi) 46.

<sup>25</sup> “Brocks-Shedd, Virgia, papers [manuscript], 1965 – 1993,” Mississippi Department of Archives and History, accessed September 6, 2021, [http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=103139&query\\_desc=su%2Cwrdl%3A%20virgia%20brocks%20shedd](http://zed.mdah.state.ms.us/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=103139&query_desc=su%2Cwrdl%3A%20virgia%20brocks%20shedd)

member of various theater groups and the performance group in honor of Alexander, Daughters of Margaret.<sup>26</sup>

In 1989, Brocks-Shedd became the first Black person to serve on the Mississippi Library Commission, appointed by the governor for a five-year term.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, her work in this historic role would be cut short by cancer, but not before she spoke openly to her colleagues at the Mississippi Library Association.

That same year, at the MLA's annual conference, she accepted Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander's award for her non-fiction work. She told the audience it was about time her home state recognized her mentor. While at the same time applauding "the intellectual growth that exists in the minds of THE NOW MISSISSIPPIANS [sic] – that no writer, black or white, will go unnoticed or underappreciated at home in this day and age."<sup>28</sup>

Brocks-Shedd worked to preserve history and sing to her history through performance until her last moments. For Tougaloo College in 1989, she won a grant through the National Endowment for the Arts to preserve the library's Civil Rights Collection and begin describing it for researchers.<sup>29</sup> Then, during Black History Month at the Coleman Library in 1992, she performed "Southern Roads/City Pavement" as part of a unique program on the work of Richard Wright. She recited the poem which showed the "struggle that black women born impoverished yet enriched in the rural south, must make to overcome the triple stigma of being

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<sup>26</sup> Mississippi Library Association, "Resolution in Honor of Virgia Brocks-Shedd," *Mississippi Libraries* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 20.

<sup>27</sup> Clarence W. Hunter, "Mississippi's Library Heritage: Virgia Brocks-Shedd," *Mississippi Libraries* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 19.

<sup>28</sup> Virgia Brocks-Shedd, "Mississippi Authors Award: 1989 Non-Fiction Winner: Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander," *Mississippi Libraries* 53, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 103

<sup>29</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 1989, Division of Research Programs, (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1990) 110.

poor black and female in America,” wrote Clarence Hunter in a description of the program for the MLA newsletter.<sup>30</sup>

Brocks-Shedd's name lives on in a scholarship annually awarded in her name at the Mississippi Library Association Conference. Administered by the Black Caucus Roundtable, the scholarship has been given to a minority student enrolled in the School of Library and Information Science program at the University of Southern Mississippi since 1994.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Clarence Hunter, “Mississippi Artist in the Diaspora, A New Look at Richard Wright,” *Mississippi Libraries* 56, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 44.

<sup>31</sup>Virginia Brocks-Shedd scholarship award, Mississippi Library Association, accessed September 6, 2021, <http://www.misslib.org/page-1859466>