

Back Valley Library Heritage Day Honors Dortha Byrd

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of January 13, 2020)

I know you enjoyed meeting Dortha "Dot" Byrd in the previous Historically Speaking column where you were provided the summary of my wonderful hour or so spent interviewing Dot. What an amazing woman with extraordinary memory recall for her advanced age.

Last May a special event was held to place a historical marker at the Smallest Library. Joani Trout, Annetta Watson and Cathy Bird provided the following details about an honor provided Dortha Byrd. Enjoy the details of that special honor awarded to the "Smallest Library in the U. S." and to Dot Byrd:

At 10:00 AM on Saturday May 25th, 2019, the Coalfield community joined with the Morgan County Genealogical and Historical Society as well as county and regional officials to honor the first librarian of the Back Valley Public Library, Dortha ("Dot") Byrd. Once considered the "Smallest Library in the USA," the Back Valley Public Library was established by local teacher May McGlothlin in July 1956, and operated by Dot with her daughter Barbie from Dot's front yard on Back Valley Road.

Dot and the Library were featured in a May 1989 episode of The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, and the funds she received from her appearance were used toward construction of the current Coalfield Public Library. The Back Valley Library building was moved to its current site adjacent to the Coalfield Public Library in 2006, where the "Smallest Library" is still operated as a public library and "the door is never locked."

The Heritage Day was organized by the Coalfield Librarian, Joani Trout, who welcomed the community; over 50 people attended the open-air event, held in front of the "Smallest Library." Matthew Jordan, Regional Director of the Clinch River Regional Library, provided a further welcome and shared excerpts from the numerous clippings and interviews surrounding Ms Byrd's recognition as a leader in the Tennessee community library movement of the 1950's and her later appearance on The Tonight show. Ms Byrd then shared some of her many experiences in serving the community as well as details of her television appearance.

Coalfield resident Annetta Watson represented the Historic Marker Committee of the Morgan County Genealogical and Historical Society; together with Ms Byrd, Ms Watson presented and unveiled the Historic Marker for the Back Valley Library. The Historic Marker program has been developed and designed by the Morgan County Genealogical and Historical Society to recognize historic structures and sites that are at least 50 years' old, and which are important to the history of Morgan County and its communities.

Such historic resources deserve to be honored and preserved, and these markers are one way to accomplish that objective. The Historic Marker program is funded by donation from a Morgan County resident, so individual markers are provided free of charge. The program is managed by volunteers who review each application and select the sites to be honored by considering the structure's historical significance as well as its condition and maintenance.

Ms Watson pointed out that the Historic Marker Committee was pleased to recognize the historical heritage and community spirit represented by the Back Valley Library and its early supporters: May McGlothlin, Dortha and Barbie Byrd, Louise Crowe, and many other members of the Back Valley and Coalfield communities. The Historic Marker Committee also recognized Alma Jones for her vision in helping move the Back Valley Library to its present location, and especially honors Dortha Byrd's hard work, dedication, knowledge and generosity.

The reception following the unveiling was held under the shaded entrance to the Coalfield Library where Ms Byrd received friends and well-wishers, including Morgan County Executive Brian Langley; Morgan County Commissioner Randy Roberts of Coalfield; Morgan County Library Board member John Nabors;

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and Jim Godwin, Chief of the Coalfield Volunteer Fire Department. Chief Godwin also contributed to advance preparations for the event by painting and repairing the Back Valley Library building.

The reception was very much a community event; flavorful cakes enjoyed by the reception guests were provided by Nancy Hall, Angie Hunter, Barbara Jackson, Wilma Overton and Jonell Gebauer, while the Mount Carmel Presbyterian Church of Coalfield provided chairs, flatware and goblets for the day. Farrah Meridith served the reception guests, and all photographs of the event were taken by Cathy Bird, Coalfield Photographer.

Additional helpers who transported chairs, ironed tablecloths, cleaned the Library and weeded flower beds in advance of Heritage Day included Angel Freels, Jane Hamby, Destiny Morrison, Penny Nunly, Maci Pelfrey, Norma Reynolds, Andrew Schubert, Benjamin Schubert, John Schubert, Samuel Schubert, Darrell Trout and Melba Wilson. Many thanks to all who contributed to this special day.

Isn't it grand to be able to recognize such a wonderful lady as Dot Byrd! Thank you Joani, Annette and Cathy

I must tell you a bit more about the interview. Dot told me about arriving in California when she was met by a man holding a sign for a "Mrs Bird" spelled with an "i" rather than a "y." She told him she was Mrs Byrd. He said, "I am your chauffeur." He offered to take the scenic route to the hotel and show her the homes of some of the movie stars. Dot said she only knew of one, Bob Hope. He said, they would drive around Bob Hope's house which she vividly recalled and described its appearance to me.

The Tonight Show hostess asked Dot if she had ever watched the show. Dot said she had not. The hostess said, "Please watch it." Dot said, "Well, if I don't forget." The hostess then said to Dot, "I dare you to tell Johnny Carson that you have never seen his show." Well, Dot did watch it once, but when Johnny asked her if she had ever seen his show, she replied, "No, I have not, I like comedy and I watch Car 54!" She said when she got back home she had a letter from Car 54.

During the show, Johnny pointed to a part of a picture of the library and said, "What is this little thing here, is that your post office?" Dot said, "You idiot, that is the book return!" Well, Dot said they got onto her for saying "idiot" on television and for calling Johnny Carson such a name. Now she did not mean anything by that remark. It sounds just like her to me. Surely he should have recognized such an obvious thing as a book return for a library!

They also did not want her to say anybody's name, but she ignored that and gave credit to May McGothin because she bought the lumber for the library and had it delivered along with a door and a window! Rightly so, May should be recognized and Dot saw to it that she did! .

Johnny gave her two books for the library. Dot fondly recalls all the good that resulted from those times. She can still get excited when talking about the publicity that she still relishes much because of the end result - a really great Coalfield Public Library and the Smallest Library located nearby. I am glad I was able to meet Dot and experience such a wonderful interaction as well as see the "Smallest Library in the U. S."

Dot still credits John Rice Irwin with starting it all and rightly so. John Rice is such a special person and I am pleased to get to visit with him some and look forward to even more suggestions for Historically Speaking. I hope you agree with me that he has certainly hit a home run when he suggested Dot Byrd and her Little Library.

Here are a couple of hyperlinks to more information about the "Smallest Library in the U.S."

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<https://www.tnvacation.com/local/coalfield-black-valley-public-library-smallest-usa>

This link takes you to more of the history of this amazing "Little Library."

<https://coalfieldlibrary.org/history/>

Finally, let me conclude with a quote from Gene Patterson, the media person John Rice Irwin connected that got all this attention to Dot Byrd. Gene said, "She was one of the more interesting characters I came across in my years covering East Tennessee. Beneath her feisty veneer was the heart of a true humanitarian who understood the gift that books provided."

Gene hit the nail on the head there. I agree, Dot's feisty for sure, but she is as sincere in her desire to help others as anyone I have ever met. What a true blessing Dortha "Dot" Byrd is to the world in which she lives.

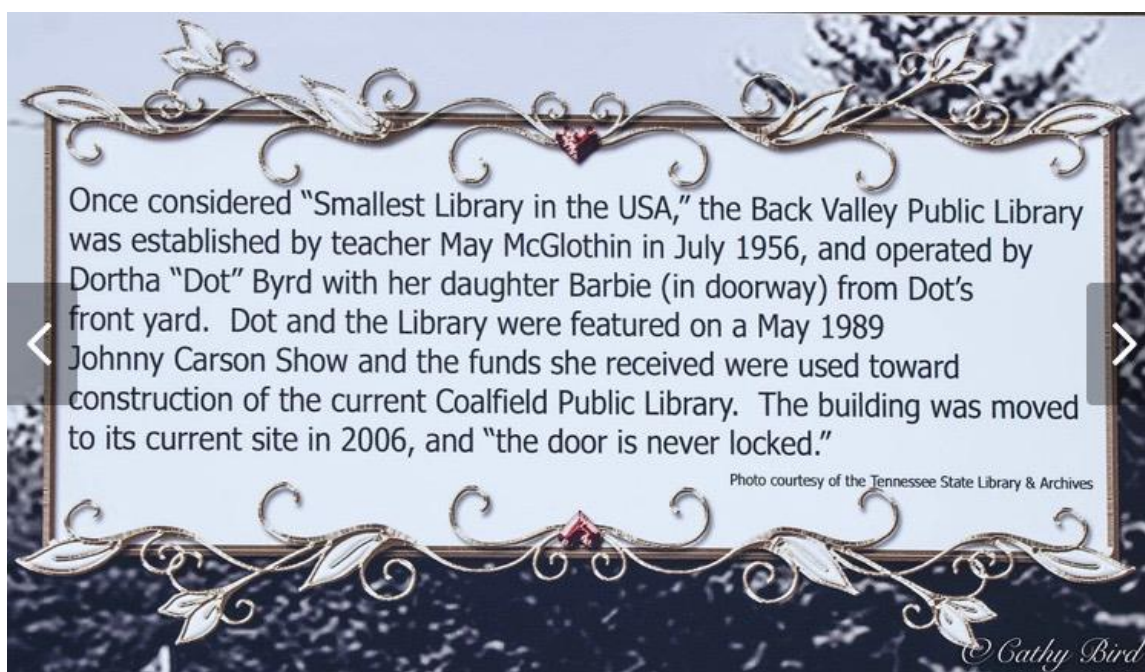
And thanks to John Rice Irwin, a much broader spectrum of our world now knows about Dot and her "Smallest Library in the U.S.!" or what she still affectionately calls her "little library."



Dot Byrd telling the audience of the history of the Little Library (Photo by Cathy Bird)

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Historic marker caption (Photo by Cathy Bird)



Matthew Jordon, Annetta Watson, Dot Byrd and Joani Trout pose with the new historical marker (Photo by Cathy Bird)