

Integration and the Alabama Library Association: Not So Black and White

Kayla Barrett and Barbara A. Bishop

In the early 1950s the Alabama Library Association attempted to integrate its membership. This failed attempt illuminated the chasm that existed between the members who were willing to change regardless of local and state segregation statutes, those who believed segregation was ethically and morally right, and those who wished the entire subject would just disappear.

As a dramatic event receiving nationwide attention, the Montgomery Bus Boycott begun in December 1955 is often used as a benchmark for the beginning of the civil rights movement. Another significant event frequently cited is the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawing school segregation. But in the ten or twelve years preceding these events southerners, including Alabamians, witnessed many changes threatening segregation, the legal and social cornerstone of southern life.

The manpower shortage of World War II gave blacks an unprecedented opportunity to move into skilled industrial jobs. Racial tensions increased as blacks moved into urban areas and their advances in socio-economic status threatened working and middle-class whites. After the war returning black servicemen, having helped to destroy the racist Nazi regime, were unwilling to tolerate racism at home.¹

Alabamians observed as the Supreme Court handed down a decision (1944) declaring unconstitutional the all-white primary which had served as the true election in one-party states such as Alabama. The decision, by outlawing this method of restricting race in primaries, threatened to open elections to black voters.²

Alabama's conservatives responded in 1946 with the Boswell Amendment, requiring prospective voters to read, write, understand, and explain a section of the U.S. Constitution to local registrars. The Supreme Court declared the amendment unconstitutional in March 1949.³ Alabamians elected a populist governor, "Big Jim" Folsom, in 1946, who

championed poll tax reform and encouraged county registrars to register black voters.⁴

Most recently, the state's Democratic Party split into factions over President Truman's civil rights program. The program included repeal of the poll tax and enforcement of legislation forbidding race-based job discrimination, and it made lynching a federal offense.⁵ During the Democratic Convention of 1948, half of Alabama's delegates walked out of the convention when the party's civil rights platform was passed. The party bolters, dubbed "Dixiecrats," convened a national gathering of states' righters in Birmingham and nominated South Carolina governor J. Strom Thurmond for president in July 1948. The Dixiecrat candidates won Alabama and three other states in the national election. In Alabama, Truman electors were kept off the ballot because states' righters controlled the State Democratic Executive Committee.⁶

These legal and political events reflected changes in attitudes throughout society, including professional life. They even affected such innocuous-seeming occupations as librarianship and its professional associations. The American Library Association accepted anyone who took part in library work with its first constitution in 1877. After black members were discriminated against at the 1936 annual convention in segregated Richmond, the American Library Association's council passed a resolution requiring that future conventions be held in cities providing equal access to meeting halls for all members. The association also sponsored studies of library service to blacks in the South. In its Library Bill of Rights, first adopted in 1939, the association advocated the right to select materials without reference to an author's race or creed.⁷

By 1950 segregation was an increasingly controversial issue in Alabama and the South, although it was by no means as inflammatory as it would become. One might wonder why members of the Alabama Library Association attempted to introduce biracial membership between 1949 and 1953. This relatively small professional association, like most library associations, promoted literacy and battled censorship, not always easy or popular tasks. But it was scarcely a hotbed of progressivism. On the surface, the time might have seemed ripe for admitting black librarians, in keeping with other progressive actions such as Governor Folsom's encouraging black voter registration and President Truman's civil rights program. But the proposal caused a backlash, and members discovered that there was a limit to the willingness of association members to absorb radical change.

The proposal to integrate first came before the Alabama Library Association's executive council at its 5 November 1949 meeting. During a debate about increasing membership, Horace S. Moses, director of the Mobile Public Library, stated that something should be done about

inviting black librarians to become members. President Gretchen Schenk, a library consultant from Summerville, Alabama, led the ensuing discussion. She reported that several southern associations, including the Southeastern Library Association, were either integrated or were exploring biracial membership. Lois R. Green, director of the Alabama Public Library Service, a state agency, estimated that there were between forty-eight and fifty professional black librarians in Alabama. One member suggested a separate Negro association. The council voted unanimously by secret ballot to canvass the Alabama Library Association membership about including blacks in the association. Schenk was to compose a cover letter to accompany the ballot and submit it to the executive council for approval.⁸

In a letter to Lois Green on 27 November 1949, Schenk enclosed a draft of the ballot and added, "worked [the cover letter] over several times & hope it reflects Ala. not Yankee, thought. . . . Want this letter to be as objective as it is possible to make it."⁹ The draft letter, a little over one page in length, was dated 7 December 1949 and began, "This is an important letter. Please read it carefully and consider it prayerfully." Schenk quoted Article 3 of the association's constitution, which stated, "Any person or institution interested in the objects of this Association may become a member of the Association on payment of the dues provided for in the by-laws." The letter continued:

When the Council discussed the matter [of biracial membership] it was without pressure from any outside individual or group. Rather, it was felt that Association members would be saved embarrassment if the matter were discussed *prior* to any formal requests for admission to membership.

She reported that the executive council members present had voted unanimously by secret ballot in favor of inviting black librarians to become members. This decision was contingent upon a favorable vote on the question by the membership at large. Schenk pointed out that Virginia's library association had been integrated for three years, and the Southeastern Library Association had voted to hold integrated meetings. North Carolina's association was polling its members regarding biracial membership.¹⁰

If Gretchen Schenk thought that her letter reflected "Ala., not Yankee, thought," she was in for a rude awakening. Secretary Sybil Baird, library consultant with Jefferson County Schools, received a letter dated 14 December 1949 from council member William Stanley Hoole, director of the University of Alabama Library. Hoole had been ill and did not attend the 5 November council meeting when admitting black librarians

was first discussed. He now told Secretary Baird, "It is my frank opinion that the letter as it now stands is obviously prejudicial, reflecting even in certain details (such as 'colored'), the affirmative thinking of the Council." Without explicitly stating that he did not share the council's affirmative thinking, he said that the membership should not be influenced either way by the suggestive comments which he thought the letter embodied. In his opinion Schenk's references to pressure from outside groups, which she had denied existed, and to other library organizations with biracial membership showed bias. Hoole stated, "The facts only need be presented in a letter of this type, not opinions or feelings of one element." He noted which paragraphs should be omitted and rewrote the balance of the letter. On 19 December 1949, Hoole followed his first letter with a second which pointed out Schenk's erroneous reporting of the executive council's resolution. The council had not voted to admit black librarians, contingent upon a favorable vote by the membership, but to canvass the membership's sentiments about admitting black librarians.¹¹

Secretary Baird, in noting Hoole's two letters as well as a phone call from him in a letter to President Schenk on 21 December 1949, tactfully told Schenk:

I am inclined to agree with him that every word of your letter cries "vote yes." I do not think that you intended this, but I believe that you feel so deeply about the matter and want so much to see the membership vote in favor of it that these feelings are reflected in the letter.

She urged that a simple statement of the council's resolution and vote would best achieve objectivity.¹²

President Schenk did not respond until 9 January 1950. She asked about the reactions of the other council members, pointing out that Hoole was only one member and not present at the discussion. She agreed to delete the first two paragraphs of her letter but maintained that the other four paragraphs were statements of fact. If the council members present at the meeting agreed that the other paragraphs were also prejudicial and they preferred Hoole's letter, that letter could go out promptly. She asked Baird to rewrite the letter in light of the reactions of all council members.¹³

On 18 January 1950 Baird reported by mail to the council members that four had voted to send Schenk's letter and three had voted for changes. She enclosed the rewritten letter. It was Hoole's version, reporting that the council had voted to canvass the association membership. The letter was half a page long, and it was mailed, along with the

ballot, to 335 association members on 23 January 1950.¹⁴ The ballot stated, "I (am, am not) in favor of opening membership in the Alabama Library Association to Negro Librarians."¹⁵

In the case of at least one influential member, the response was immediate and unequivocal. On 24 January Marie Bankhead Owen, director of the Alabama State Department of Archives and History, wrote,

I am definitely opposed to the idea [of admitting Negro librarians] and so vote *No*. They have a separate Educational Association [the Alabama State Teachers Association] and I do not see why there should be a racial admixture. I believe in setting up libraries for Negroes and giving them every encouragement in their efforts toward advancement in the work among their race.¹⁶

Secretary Baird reported the results of the canvass at the 25 February 1950 executive council meeting, a month and two days after the ballot was mailed. At this point no one could claim that the question of biracial membership was of burning interest to the association. Fifty-five had voted for admitting blacks, forty-one had voted against.¹⁷ This was a return rate of 28.6 percent. Eight suggested that black librarians should have a separate section or association. A few members were equivocal: "I am in favor of letting the negroes in on our State Meetings and in associations if it is possible to then keep them segregated (rather to have their own Libraries separate from ours in the cities and towns)." One librarian worried, "I don't believe we are ready for this yet," and another said, "Personally, I am not opposed to working with Negro Librarians but so long as we have separate schools, separate A.E.A. organizations, etc. in Alabama it might not be wise to admit them to the Alabama Library Association. Why couldn't they organize separately?" One member was in favor of admitting blacks "if the practical problem of meeting places can be solved," a vital concern with biracial membership. Another member in favor of admitting blacks pointed out, "according to the constitution any negro could belong—trustees, friends of libraries, etc.," while another stated bluntly, "They are in the same field as we are."¹⁸ Those members who merely marked their ballots probably had opinions somewhere along the spectrum represented by those who expressed theirs in writing.

The association members who favored a separate association for black librarians were ignorant of the fact that one already existed. Black librarians had been meeting as a departmental unit of the Alabama State Teachers Association, the black teachers' association, since 1944. The Alabama Association of School Librarians for black librarians was formally organized in 1947. The association stressed recruitment and

raising professional standards, and served as a clearinghouse for school library problems. It held annual spring meetings and fall workshops to which leaders in education and librarianship were invited as keynote speakers.¹⁹ Some of the speakers were prominent members of the American Library Association. According to Carrie C. Robinson, one of the association's founders, most of the school librarians were not ALA members. Inviting ALA speakers helped to acquaint school librarians with the ALA and introduce them to the outstanding leaders in school librarianship.²⁰

The Alabama Library Association executive council decided to appoint a committee to further study the advisability and feasibility of holding biracial meetings. It was suggested that the committee should talk with several black librarians "to see what their reactions are."²¹ President Schenk wrote to Harlan C. Brown, the president of the North Carolina Library Association, to inquire about the procedures used by the committee appointed by that association to investigate the same question.²² It took the rest of the year to form the Alabama committee, and by the executive council meeting of 6 January 1951, a chair had not been appointed. At that meeting the council decided to invite black librarians in positions of leadership to meet with the biracial committee during the annual convention in April. The committee would inquire if black librarians would like to be invited to join the Alabama Library Association.²³

By 14 February 1951 Florence Showalter, a library trustee from Auburn, had agreed to serve as chair of the biracial committee. President Schenk suggested that the committee hold its meeting with black librarians the afternoon of 12 April 1951, the first day of the three-day convention. Some of the black librarians could then attend the open executive council meeting "to explain or discuss any points that need ironing out." She reported that Sadie P. Delaney, chief librarian at the Veterans' Hospital in Tuskegee, had written to her that Delaney and the rest "would be willing to cooperate in any way, or words to that affect [*sic*]."²⁴

Several days later President Schenk wrote to Showalter with the names of four other committee members. In May 1950 the executive council had approved a list of fourteen association members to ask to serve on the committee. As is often the case with volunteer associations, finding members willing to serve in offices and on committees was sometimes difficult. The Biracial Committee's potentially controversial task probably increased members' reluctance to serve. The resulting panel of five was small considering the importance of its mission.

Schenk also reported to Showalter that she would ask Dr. Delaney to send Showalter a list of black librarians. She continued,

Since I do not know a single Negro librarian except Mrs. Delaney and her only through correspondence, I can give you no suggestions on who is to be invited to the meeting. . . . Would it be possible for the Negro librarians to choose five members among themselves to attend the committee meeting? That is merely a suggestion, since I have nothing else to offer. Miss Baird mentioned that there was an able Negro librarian in one of the high schools in Jefferson County, I believe. She may be able to give you further information on her.²⁵

In replying to President Schenk's letter, Sybil Baird agreed that the biracial committee meeting should be held prior to the open executive council meeting. She thought, however, that asking any black librarians to attend the executive council meeting was premature. She suggested that the committee chair should first make a detailed report to the entire membership at the open meeting and that discussion should follow. She warned, "I realize that you think that we are very slow, but one unwise move could do a great deal of harm. Better take it slowly, for some of our members are not in sympathy with bi-racial membership."²⁶

Gretchen Schenk rejected the secretary's advice. In a letter written several days before the conference, she wrote:

I finally came to the decision that the first meeting at which Negroes are in attendance will always be difficult, . . . The members who are not in sympathy with the move will hardly be any more sympathetic one or two years from now because we all know that it is largely an emotional problem. And since I have no official position in the state, no ax to grind, no "face" to lose, and since my "responsibility shoulders" have had to become quite broad with the years, it would seem that the first plunge might well be taken this year.²⁷

The joint meeting of the biracial committee with black librarians was held the afternoon of 12 April 1951. Sixteen were present, ten black librarians and six members of the Alabama Library Association. For unknown reasons, only four committee members were present.²⁸ According to the committee's report, "The Negroes present expressed the wish to affiliate with the Ala.L.A. [*sic*] and a desire for full membership privileges." It was pointed out that the association would have to make clear that it needed accommodations for biracial meetings when invitations were received from communities to host its conventions. The report concluded, "The Negroes voiced their appreciation of the meeting and look forward to contributing their talents in the work of the Association

through membership on committees and participation in any other manner in which they can serve the cause of better libraries." At some point, nine black librarians paid their three dollars in dues and joined the Alabama Library Association.²⁹

The open executive council meeting was held that night, with the black librarians attending. W. S. Hoole asked what had happened to the biracial question.³⁰ He wanted to know what plans had been made for future meetings, if the attending Negroes were already members or if they were visitors, and if they would be invited to join the general session the next day. According to the minutes, Hoole noted that he was from a conservative institution and that he was a conservative member of that institution. After stating that he felt obliged to report the association's action to the University of Alabama, he requested an honest statement of any action taken.

Schenk recounted the history of the biracial movement to that point. Another member told the black librarians "that she wanted them to realize that many librarians are willing to accept Negroes professionally but convention, law and mores of our region prevent accepting them socially." When asked if the biracial committee's report would be sent to the entire membership, Secretary Baird replied that it would.

A black library consultant working for the State of Alabama Department of Education, Carrie C. Robinson, said that everyone realized that the question would not and did not have to be settled at the meeting. She added that some of the black librarians at the biracial committee meeting were apprehensive and no one wished to railroad biracial membership through the association. Dr. Delaney spoke of other groups in Alabama with biracial membership, pointing out that one, the Social Welfare Group, had a black member serving as secretary. "She stated that Negroes are intelligent and that all they ask is what can be given at a time."³¹

Carrie Robinson, recording her memories of that open executive council meeting twenty-six years later, recalled a much more tense and acrimonious meeting than the minutes indicate. In addition to the remarks about representing a conservative institution, Hoole asked, "Who is stuffing these Negroes down our throats?" According to Robinson,

The ease with which some members of the Alabama Library Association demeaned prospective black members was appalling. . . . "They would have to use the freight elevator," said someone else. "And they could not attend our dinner meeting," said still another. These comments left me with no doubt that I, or the school librarians for whom I was there to speak, had no desire to join an

organization whose constituency had nothing to offer. Why were we black people subjecting ourselves to such insults? This was the question which overwhelmed me, a relative newcomer to Alabama. And why weren't we responding verbally to these people, I wondered. So incensed with their bigotry, insensitivity, and indeed their feelings that any black librarian stood to gain anything more than personal and professional degradation by joining such an organization, I was compelled to so inform them. I vividly recall the expeditious adjournment of that meeting.

Robinson also acknowledged that Gretchen Schenk was completely unaware of the association's unreadiness to admit black members.³²

The executive council meeting revealed the depth of animosity to biracial membership felt by association members. Two days later, on 14 April 1951, Hoole sent a telegram announcing that he was unable to attend the annual business meeting that day due to illness. He requested that the association proceed with caution and study not only "the immediate altruism" of the proposal but "the many unhappy implications which are bound to follow" its passage. "The glory gained by the outgoing administration which has fostered the bi-racial issue would certainly not be shared by the new administration which must follow to carry out the mandate," he warned. In addition, the state's citizens upon whom librarians depended for their livelihoods had not progressed so far in their "sociological thinking" as some association members. He stated in conclusion, "An eagerness on the part of a few to be noble now could lead to grave trouble later." Mabel Willoughby, Howard College librarian and the association's new president, read the telegram aloud at the business meeting.³³

The controversy continued at the executive council meeting the next day, 15 April. Gretchen Schenk, as immediate past president, was a council member. She reported for the biracial committee in the absence of committee chair Florence Showalter and suggested that Clyde Cantrell, director of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute Library in Auburn, be added to the committee. As later events proved, Cantrell favored biracial membership, and Schenk probably wanted an ally on the committee. In discussing plans for the next convention, a new point of contention was introduced into the debate. President Willoughby asserted that accommodations for a biracial meeting need not be planned since the membership at large had not yet voted on biracial membership. Schenk contended that the mail vote constituted a vote of the membership at large, resulting in a favorable vote on the biracial issue. This was another instance of Schenk's inaccuracy in citing council decisions. In fact,

according to the wording of the cover letter, the canvass on biracial membership was exploratory and did not constitute a final vote.

Sybil Baird pointed out that the question must be discussed in an open meeting of association members before a vote could be taken. Members would also have to decide what would constitute a majority vote on the issue.³⁴ The bylaws merely stated that a quorum to transact business consisted of twenty-five members. Voting was not mentioned.³⁵ The council decided to postpone further discussion until the biracial committee could meet and reinvestigate the problem, and to enlarge the committee to include more representative opinion. The treasurer asked what to do with the dues paid by the nine black librarians who had joined the association. Gretchen Schenk asked if she could write to them and explain the situation. It was decided to refund dues to those who were unwilling to accept less than full membership privileges.³⁶

In a letter of 27 April 1951, Gretchen Schenk defended her actions and her interpretation of the mail ballot at length to new president Mabel Willoughby. She told the new president that she had written to thank the ten black librarians who attended the biracial committee meeting. But she did not know what to do about the nine black librarians who had joined the association, especially since the issue of full membership privileges had been raised. She made her position clear: "I don't believe there is a basic difference in our objective since we all know that biracial membership is coming, if we do not have it already," a statement with which many members would have disagreed. She defended the binding legality of the mail ballot, saying a mail ballot was the best method to reach the total membership, and that the favorable majority vote on the question closed the canvass. "The fact that only 96 people took the trouble to vote, . . . only seems to indicate that our members are not used to voting—not even by mail on so important a matter as bi-racial membership."

Schenk deplored the insinuations that biracial membership had been railroaded through the council and had not been discussed at the 14 April business meeting. In concluding, she expressed regret that the issue was not resolved during her term as president and again asserted that she had no personal interest in the issue of biracial membership. She wrote:

And should you hear the charge that I am a damyankee do-gooder, pressing for Negro membership, I can only point to my work record here in the South during the past five years. No d.d. [*sic*] would have had the privilege as I have had of working in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and Mississippi and other states had I been bent on "reforming."³⁷

Mabel Willoughby merely replied that the association's constitution was silent on the subject of a mail vote, so a majority mail vote had not been established on the question of biracial membership. A change in the by-laws would be necessary before such action would be legal. The biracial committee would continue to study the issue, she said, and if they felt biracial membership advisable, they would call for another vote. If the membership at large felt, as Schenk did, that the question had already been settled, "it will be only a matter of time before full membership privileges will be extended to the Negroes."³⁸

Willoughby was correct in stating that the association's constitution did not mention a mail vote. But the association had employed mail ballots before the vote on biracial membership. In fact, about the same time that the ballot on biracial membership went out, association members were canvassed by mail on the question of whether the American Library Association office in Washington should reopen for two years, whether the Alabama Library Association should contribute to its maintenance, and if so, how. The results were reported at the 25 February 1950 executive council meeting.³⁹

Although Gretchen Schenk had asked to write to the black librarians who had joined the association, offering to refund their dues, it was unclear whether or not she had done so or if the dues had been refunded.⁴⁰ The biracial committee was expanded and a new chair, Ruth Schaeffer, librarian at Ozark High School, took over. Two committee members, Sybil Baird, now vice-president and president-elect, and Pauline M. Foster, assistant professor at the University of Alabama's School of Library Service, wrote with suggestions for the committee to consider. Both expressed concern about complying with state and local segregation ordinances and suggested that letters should be written to Alabama cities, asking what accommodations they could offer for biracial meetings.

Pauline Foster also suggested that the committee investigate the status of biracial membership in other southern state associations and question other Alabama organizations with biracial membership about their provisions for meetings and the numbers of black members attending. Sybil Baird suggested that the committee should decide what specifically it could offer to black members and so inform them when they were invited to join the association. This suggestion raised the possibility that black members might not have full membership status. Gretchen Schenk had intended that black members should have full and equal membership privileges. The all-important question of method of voting and of determining a majority would also have to be decided before proceeding further.⁴¹

The issue of biracial membership concerned Membership Committee chair Mildred P. Baer, librarian at Marion Institute, who was trying to

impose order on the association's membership files. She wanted a voice in the biracial committee's objectives as well. While drawing up membership lists of the various committees, Baer asked hopefully of the biracial committee, "Will that be a regular committee, or will it (maybe) be dropped at end of year?" She continued,

As long as the A.E.A. [Alabama Education Association] has separate organizations for the white and the negro teachers, a small organization like Alabama Library Association cannot afford to imperil its prestige and position with the "powers that be" by taking such a drastic step as that proposed.

Willoughby responded that the committee should remain for this next year.⁴²

The 13 October 1951 executive council meeting demonstrated that members were steering away from approving biracial membership. Biracial committee chair Ruth Schaeffer reported a conference held with Carrie Robinson, of the State Department of Education, where the positive and negative aspects of both biracial membership and of a separate black library association had been discussed. Comparable committees of the two organizations would meet to share ideas and become acquainted: "If we know the Negro librarians in the state we will not be reluctant to invite them in as members." The biracial committee concluded that its objective was the organization of a Negro Alabama Library Association. Once that objective was reached, the issue of biracial membership could be carefully explored. The study would incorporate Pauline Foster's and Sybil Baird's suggestions. Above all, however, "We must be very careful not to mis-manage our affairs on bi-racial committee. We must carry out the will of the majority of the Association whatever it may be."⁴³

At that executive council meeting the treasurer, Joe D. Langston, librarian with the Jefferson County Free Library, was instructed to write to the black librarians who had joined the association, explain the situation, and refund their dues. It was also decided, on motion of President Willoughby, to send them the dues for the remainder of the year. Upon receiving Langston's letter and her refunded dues, Sadie P. Delaney of Tuskegee retorted:

This is to point up to the Executive Council of the Alabama Library Association that we did not solicit membership, but were invited to become members and voted on by the Council. We do not feel that an error was committed and we ask for you to explain what the error is.

It is difficult to believe that a library association would make such a move, inasmuch as dietitians, sociologists and others have been accepted in their Alabama state associations.⁴⁴

The concern expressed by association members about complying with segregation laws was genuine. State segregation ordinances applied to intrastate services such as train transportation, while municipalities devised segregation ordinances for local services. Birmingham and Montgomery both had ordinances mandating segregation in restaurants, on local public transportation such as buses and taxis, in gaming establishments such as pool halls, and in public toilet facilities. The ordinance most prohibitive to biracial meetings, besides the restaurant ordinance forbade any theatrical performance, picture exhibition, speech, or educational or entertainment program in any room, hall, theater, picture house, auditorium, yard, court, ball park, or other place without separate entrances, exits, and seating and standing sections for whites and blacks, with well-defined physical barriers. The person in charge of the meeting place was responsible for effectively enforcing the law.⁴⁵ The segregation ordinances in the 1952 Montgomery City Code were harsher and more numerous than in the 1938 code. An examination of the state segregation laws passed in the same time period shows an increase in segregation ordinances passed after 1945.⁴⁶ The relatively recent strengthening of the segregation code reflected a hardening of public opinion on race relations during and after World War II.⁴⁷

Alabama Library Association members could not be blind to the prevailing sentiments of white taxpayers toward race and segregation, even if they did not actively share them. On the other hand, other southern associations had overcome the obstacles to biracial membership. Virginia's association had met in churches, and the Southeastern Library Association (SELA) had given up its banquet, since blacks were forbidden by law to eat in public with whites. At least one SELA member reported that members seemed happy to forego the expense of the banquet and to have more time to visit with friends and attend sessions.⁴⁸

The specter of negative public opinion, and the furor raised within the association over biracial membership, made some members think twice about the proposal. A former committee member stressed at the 13 October 1951 executive council meeting,

It is most important that the Association, or its leaders, do not get divided into two factions on this issue. We must become united to work toward our goals instead of taking sides for and against. The unity of the Association is far more important than this decision, whichever way it is made.

The most impassioned advocate of biracial membership was probably Gretchen Schenk. When she left office, supporters of the status quo could control debate and action on the issue.

After months of behind-the-scenes work, the biracial committee met on 18 January 1952. After Willoughby reviewed the committee's activities during the last three years, Schaeffer discussed the issue from her standpoint as chair. Black school librarians were trying to determine whether a separate black library association would be of greater benefit than membership in the Alabama Library Association, and they were looking at other solutions. Willoughby read correspondence between several black librarians and herself regarding membership in the association. She also read letters from presidents of six southeastern state library associations, answering her queries regarding biracial membership in their associations. Of Mississippi, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Florida, and North Carolina, only the two latter states had separate black library associations. She did not report if the first four states had biracial membership or no association at all for black librarians.

There followed a lengthy discussion of several proposed solutions. These included extending full membership to black librarians; indefinitely postponing the decision; declining membership to Negroes (who had not asked for it) and encouraging them to organize their own association; and recommending "that the cause of librarianship in Alabama would best be served by the creation of a separate Alabama Negro Library Association." The only apparent difference between the last two proposals was that the former involved formal denial of membership to blacks. In the end, Sybil Baird moved, and the committee passed, that "The Biracial Committee recommends that the cause of librarianship in Alabama will be best served by the creation of a separate Alabama Negro Library Association." The resolution did not deny membership outright to black librarians.⁴⁹

Several days later, Mildred Baer, librarian at Marion Institute and Membership Committee chair, wrote to Mabel Willoughby with a question about the meeting. Willoughby responded that, if she remembered correctly, the resolution approved by the committee included the association's willingness to assist black librarians in any way possible. She would clarify with Schaeffer whether the resolution included that statement. She continued, "I believe the recommendation of the Committee is sound and wise. We cannot be too blunt in our refusal to offer membership to the Negroes right now. If so, the NAACP will lose no time in giving it sensational headline coverage."⁵⁰ The committee's final report, dated 10 March 1952, did not mention the association's willingness to aid black librarians.⁵¹

The report was presented at the association's business meeting during the 1952 convention in Birmingham, 24–26 April. Schaeffer moved for the report's adoption and was seconded. After discussion, however, it was moved, seconded, and passed to table the motion. Clyde Cantrell, head librarian at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, moved to resubmit by mail the question of biracial membership to the association's members. The motion was seconded and passed, but Fannie Schmitt, from the State Department of Education's School Libraries Department, proposed an amendment to take no action without further study and discussion. Her amendment passed 22 to 11. Thus amended, Cantrell's motion passed 25 to 1.⁵²

The minutes give only the outline of what must have been a bitter and contentious debate, as indicated by correspondence between association members in the following months. On 14 May 1952 Jean L. Hoffman, a Birmingham school librarian, wrote to new president Sybil Baird about serving as chair of the Membership Committee. She had tried to call Baird several times since the convention:

I left the Business Meeting with a "bad Taste" on account of the way Mr. Cantrell acted as spokesman for some of the public library groups who would like to see colored members admitted to membership.

May I tell you that I feel that our group is too small to open the doors since no other professional group in Alabama has done so to date. I have discussed this with A.A.U.W. members, doctors, and a lawyer. The implications are entirely too great for the public schools and colleges of Alabama at this particular time.⁵³

Hoffman was not the only association officer dismayed by Clyde Cantrell's remarks. Baird received a letter on 6 August from the new vice-president and president-elect, John K. Cameron, chief of the reference section at Air University Library in Montgomery. Regarding committee appointments, he wrote,

I think the biracial committee can languish for a year or so without hurting anyone. We just get ourselves stirred up over it and it seems to me useless until things simmer down a little. We don't have any negro librarians clamoring to enter our association, do we?⁵⁴

Willa M. Boysworth, Huntingdon College librarian and the new association secretary, also writing about committee appointments, asked what was to be done about the biracial committee. "Don't you think that we

should let it die a quiet little death regardless of Cantrell and his verbosity?? Ken [John K. Cameron] and I both feel this way about it since it is the one thing that gets our meetings in a complete state of chaos."⁵⁵

At the executive council meeting on 11 October 1952, the council discharged the biracial committee and decided to take up the committee's work. Concerning the committee's report the minutes stated, "Since the Bi-racial Committee submitted a report which appeared to be unsatisfactory to the membership of the Association, this committee was discharged, and their problem was taken under consideration by the Executive Council."⁵⁶

In responding to Pauline Foster's comment that the elimination of the banquet at that year's SELA meeting had worked well, Sybil Baird agreed but added that she thought it would be bad to cut the banquets from Alabama Library Association meetings. One black librarian had expressed to her the opinion that the nature of the meetings should not be changed in order to admit blacks. She resignedly concluded:

There seems, at present, no answer to the problem. Council decided at their last meeting to discharge the biracial committee and take the responsibility of study. This action was taken because a majority of the members of council felt that we need a cooling off period. There is, no doubt, that the lack of control shown by some members at the last business session was unbecoming to professional people. We are not strong enough to be turn [*sic*] by internal strife.⁵⁷

One of the "troublemakers," Clyde Cantrell, did not let the dismissal of the biracial committee pass without protest. After receiving the winter issue of the *Alabama Librarian* in January 1953 with its notice of the biracial committee's discharge, he wrote to President Baird by registered mail:

I doubt seriously that the membership of the Association will consider this to be an adequate substitute for the directive issued to you and officers of the Association at the last annual meeting; namely, that a poll of the membership be taken to determine once and for all whether or not Negroes may be accepted. . . . Having had some experience of the presidency of the Association and knowing something about parliamentary procedure, I am unable to understand, nor does the constitution as printed offer any loophole whereby the Executive Committee of its own accord may set aside action of the membership in convention assembled.

You and the officers of the Association are elected by the membership as a whole, and you are honor bound to carry out any action

taken by the membership. It seems, therefore, that unless you as President go forward with the vote by mail as passed almost unanimously at the last meeting you will not be carrying out the wishes of the Association as a whole.⁵⁸

Baird responded by quoting Fannie Schmitt's amendment to his motion from the minutes, that no action be taken without further study and discussion. She continued, "The Council's action in undertaking further study was in fact carrying out the Association's intent, and to do otherwise the Council would indeed be at fault."⁵⁹

Later that month, the first vice-president of the Louisiana Library Association wrote to Baird, asking her about the Alabama Library Association's position on biracial membership. Louisiana had voted in 1947 to admit black members, but because of segregation laws had never been able to make satisfactory arrangements for them to attend meetings. After reporting that Alabama had not yet opened membership to blacks, Baird wrote, "It is my personal opinion that until segregation laws are changed in Alabama and until the lay public including trustees become better educated that Alabama will do well not to open membership to Negroes." She added that some of the black librarians had said they did not want membership without full privileges, that they did not want to enter by the back door, while some white librarians did not wish to see "their good friends of the Negro race" subjected to the embarrassment inevitable with the current segregation laws. Members did not want to give up luncheon or dinner meetings; they as well as some blacks felt that the customary meetings should not be altered in order to admit blacks. Baird had heard that North Carolina had opened membership to black librarians, but only a few attended. Convention costs had soared because of the difficulty in arranging for rooms and rest room facilities for black members.⁶⁰

Sybil Baird had found the problems surrounding biracial membership overwhelming and their possible solutions unacceptable. While she had at first supported biracial membership, she was unwilling to support radical change in order to achieve it, much less to risk splintering the association over the issue. Like other members, she wanted easy change. And like other members, she justified the association's position by citing black librarians who declined biracial membership.

The issue of biracial membership in Alabama remained dormant until the passage of a new constitution in 1955 by the American Library Association. In addition to limiting chapters to one per geographic area, local chapters had to open membership to all interested parties within that area.⁶¹ In the midst of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in early 1956, the Alabama Library Association's executive council examined ways to

amend the association's constitution so that it could qualify for ALA chapter status despite local segregation ordinances. No easy solution was forthcoming. In April 1956 the council passed a motion, recorded in its official minutes, "that it is the intent and will of this Executive Council . . . (just as soon as local, municipal, and state ordinances permit) to give full consideration to the acceptance of qualified librarians, of whatever race, to membership in this association." The association withdrew from chapter status since it could not comply with chapter requirements.⁶²

With the racial climate becoming increasingly embittered after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the situation remained at an impasse for the next several years. The American Library Association's annual convention in July 1964 coincided with the signing of the Civil Rights Act outlawing racial segregation. During the convention the ALA's council ruled that its officers and staff members could not attend in official capacity the meetings of any state association unable to meet ALA chapter requirements.⁶³ The policy directly affected several Alabama Library Association members active in the ALA and served as the final impetus toward integrating the association. Finally, on 4 December 1964,

After a lengthy discussion of membership standards, the [Alabama Library Association Executive] Council received and carried the motion that no membership application be screened in regards to color or race and that all membership applications be accepted as presented in keeping with Bylaw 3, section 1.

Association president Robert Severance informed American Library Association president Edwin Castegna of the decision. Knowing that the council's action would be highly controversial, Severance told Castegna that the association would delay applying for chapter status and requested a minimum of publicity on the policy change. The Alabama Library Association held its first desegregated meeting that spring in Mobile, "where a number of the state's Negro librarians attended and participated fully and freely in all activities of the association." It had taken fifteen years, but the Alabama Library Association was integrated at last, with both white and black members enjoying full and equal membership privileges.⁶⁴

Notes

1. William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 514.

2. William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats: Alabama Politics, 1942-1950* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 59.

3. *Ibid.*, 60–64, 128.
4. Rogers et. al., *Alabama*, 529–30; Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats*, 135–6.
5. Rogers et. al., *Alabama*, 533.
6. *Ibid.*: 534–45.
7. "Institutional Membership in ALA," *ALA Bulletin* 60 (April 1966): 369–70.
8. Executive Council Minutes, 5 November 1949. Alabama Library Association Records, University of Alabama Dept. of Special Collections.
9. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Lois Green, 27 November 1949.
10. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Alabama Library Association members, 7 December 1949.
11. W. S. Hoole to Gretchen Knief Schenk, 14 December 1949; 19 December 1949.
12. Sybil Baird to Gretchen Knief Schenk, 21 December 1949.
13. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Sybil Baird, 9 January 1950.
14. 306 individual members, 14 institutional members, and 15 club members. *Alabama Librarian*, vol. 1, no. 4 (October 1950), Directory of Members.
15. Memorandum, Sybil Baird to Alabama Library Association Executive Council Members, 18 January 1950; Letter, Executive Council to Fellow Members of the Alabama Library Association, 23 January 1950.
16. Marie Bankhead Owen to Sybil Baird, 24 January 1950.
17. Alabama Library Association Executive Council Minutes, 25 February 1950.
18. Ballots, biracial membership canvass, February 1950.
19. Carrie C. Robinson, "The Alabama Association of School Librarians," in *The Handbook of Black Librarianship*, by E. J. Josey and Ann Allen Shockley (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1977), 47–9.
20. Interview with Carrie C. Robinson, 27 October 1995.
21. Executive Council Minutes, 25 February 1950.
22. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Harlan C. Brown, 12 March 1950.
23. Executive Council Minutes, 6 January 1951.
24. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Sybil Baird, 14 February 1951.
25. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Florence Showalter, 21 February 1951; Gretchen Knief Schenk to Florence Showalter, 20 March 1951.
26. Sybil Baird to Gretchen Knief Schenk, 20 March 1951.
27. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Sybil Baird, 7 April 1951.
28. Committee members present were Florence Showalter (chair); Mildred Smith, Vigor High School, Pritchard; and Nellie L. Glass, Montgomery Public Library director. President Schenk; Lois R. Green; and Margaret Thomas, Howard College, were the other white members present. The attending black members were Carrie C. Robinson; Sadie P. Delaney; M. D. Sprague, Tuskegee Institute; Grace E. Toosen, Stillman Institute; Ollie L. Brown, Alabama State College; Louvenia R. Brown, Hudson High School, Selma; Willie M. Moffett, Washington Branch, Birmingham Public Library; Artemesia Jones, Veterans Administration Hospital, Tuskegee; Beulah E. Cooper, Veterans Administration Hospital, Tuskegee; Bertha Pleasant Williams, branch librarian, Montgomery Public Library. Attendance List, Bi-Racial Committee Meeting, 12 April 1951.
29. Bi-Racial Committee report, Alabama Library Association, 12 April 1951; "List of Negro Members Marked '1951 New,'" n.d.
30. Hoole was listed as a member of the Bi-Racial Committee in February but did not attend the joint meeting. Since Schenk was uncertain if all members of the committee had accepted when she listed them in February, Hoole may not have been a committee member.

31. Executive Council Open Meeting Minutes, 12 April 1951.
32. Robinson, "The Alabama Association of School Librarians," 49.
33. Telegram, W. Stanley Hoole to Mabel E. Willoughby, 14 April 1951; Alabama Library Association Annual Business Meeting Minutes, 14 April 1951.
34. Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 15 April 1951.
35. Constitution and By-Laws of the Alabama Library Association. *Alabama Librarian*, vol. 1, no. 2 (April 1950): 17-9.
36. Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 15 April 1951.
37. Gretchen Knief Schenk to Mabel E. Willoughby, 27 April 1951.
38. Mabel E. Willoughby to Gretchen Knief Schenk, 9 May 1951.
39. Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 25 February 1950. Only sixty-five Association members voted on the first question and sixty-eight on the second, but the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of both questions, 62 to 3 on question one, and 63 to 5 on question two.
40. Mabel E. Willoughby to Sophia Sullivan, 23 May 1951; Mabel E. Willoughby to Mildred P. Baer, 16 July 1951.
41. Sybil Baird to Ruth Schaeffer, 21 May 1951; Pauline M. Foster to Mabel E. Willoughby, 28 May 1951.
42. Mildred P. Baer to Mabel E. Willoughby, 2 August 1951; Mabel E. Willoughby to Mildred P. Baer, 10 August 1951.
43. Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 13 October 1951.
44. S. P. Delaney to Joe D. Langston, 31 October 1951.
45. Birmingham, Ala., Separation of Races Law, General Code (1944), sec. 859; Montgomery, Ala., Separation of Races—Generally Law, City Code (1952), code 34, sec. 5.
46. Montgomery, Ala., Code of Ordinances (1938), sec. 35, 311-2, 603-7, 683; City Code (1952), c. 6, sec. 10-11; c. 10, sec. 14; c. 13, sec. 25; c. 20, sec. 28; c. 25, sec. 5-6; c. 34, sec. 5-6.
47. For further discussion, see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 118-22.
48. Pauline Foster to Sybil Baird, 13 November 1952. Foster continued, "Now I am wondering whether some of us have made an error in assuming that luncheon and dinner meetings are an essential part of the Alabama Library Association Meeting."
49. Executive Council Minutes, 18 January 1952.
50. Mabel E. Willoughby to Mildred Baer, 24 January 1952.
51. Bi-Racial Committee Report, 10 March 1951. Although dated 1951, the report states that the last committee meeting took place 18 January 1952 and details the committee's activities as stated in the 18 January minutes, so the 1951 is probably a typographical error.
52. Business Session Minutes, 26 April 1952, 2.
53. Jean L. Hoffman to Sybil Baird, 14 May 1952. As already pointed out, there were professional groups with biracial membership.
54. John K. Cameron to Sybil Baird, 6 August 1952.
55. Willa M. Boysworth to Sybil Baird, 7 August 1952.
56. Executive Council Meeting Minutes, 11 October 1952.
57. Sybil Baird to Pauline Foster, 4 December 1952.
58. Clyde Cantrell to Sybil Baird, 15 February 1953.
59. Sybil Baird to Clyde Cantrell, 3 March 1953.
60. Vivian Cazayoux to Sybil Baird, 31 March 1953; Sybil Baird to Vivian Cazayoux, 8 April 1953.

61. "Institutional Membership in ALA," 371.
62. Executive Council Minutes, 11 February 1956; *ibid.*, 27 April 1956.
63. "Institutional Membership in ALA," 374.
64. Executive Council Minutes, 4 December 1964; Robert Severance to Edwin Castegna, n.d.; *The Alabama Librarian*, vol. 16, no. 2 (April 1965): 7.