

At 94, Covenanter Elsie Chandler is still introducing children to the love of books.

THE OLDEST LIBRARIAN IN ALABAMA TELLS ALL



BOB SMIETANA

At ninety-four, Elsie Chandler of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Silverhill, Alabama, has made a few concessions to her age.

She doesn't drive—"I don't see well enough," she says, "and I don't have a car." And while she does her own cooking, laundry, and gardening, she finally did hire someone to mow her lawn. But she still walks about four miles a day, including a two-mile walk to the post office and back. And on Thursdays and Saturdays, you'll find her at the Oscar Johnson Memorial Library where she's been the librarian for more than fifty years.

"I don't like to sit around much," Chandler says. "At my age, I better not sit down—if you sit down too long your legs start to give out."

The library was opened in 1907 by the Non Pariel Club, a local social organization. It's still run mostly by

about half a dozen volunteers, although Chandler, who works about fifteen hours a week, gets a small stipend of \$50 a month from the state. The oldest active librarian in Alabama, she began working at the library in the 1950s with some of the original volunteers from the Non Pariel Club. At the time, she and her husband, Leslie, ran the general store in this small community of about 600 people, about thirty miles from Mobile.

When she first starting coming to the library, after moving to the area with her parents in 1928, there was no electricity and most people walked or came by horse-drawn wagons. The library still retains some old-fashioned touches—its records are kept on an index file

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at the circulation desk. In recent years, they have added a computer for the children’s section, and a few videos, though Chandler frowns on them. “I hate them, but that’s the future,” she told the Associated Press in an interview last year. “I don’t have anything like that in my house.”

But Chandler delights in helping children discover the joy of reading. And her favorite time of the week is when the students from the Silverhill Covenant Church’s preschool come by for a visit.

“On Thursdays, we have twenty-two children come by for story time, and then I treat them all with candy,” she says. “They check out books and bring back books and I take care of all of that.” Last year, the town named a new children’s addition to the library after Chandler.

There are several nearby libraries that are larger than the one in Silverhill, but Tina Lorraine, one of the volunteers, says it’s important to have one that’s easily accessible to kids in the town. “We are here for the local kids—kids who come by on their bicycles,” says Lorraine, who has been a volunteer for about twenty years.

“We are proud of the kids who grew up in the community and who have now scattered,” she says.

One of those “kids” was Dr. George Lundberg, who lived next to the Chandlers’ store. A graduate of North Park Junior College, he was editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for seventeen years. A copy his 2002 book, *Severed Trust: Why American Medicine Hasn’t Been Fixed*, is in the Silver-

hill library. Chandler hasn’t had a chance to read Lundberg’s book just yet—someone else has it checked out.

“One of the ladies has it and she is a slow reader,” Chandler says. “I just can’t wait to read it and see what he has to say.”

Lundberg, who is editor of *Medscape General Medicine* (part of webmd.net) says that as a child, he was in the Chandlers’ store just about every day. An old-time country store, it was first opened by Theodore Axel Johnson, his grandfather and one of the first settlers in Silverhill.

He says that Chandler has been a



“stalwart in the community” and was always “helpful and jovial” in the store. “I don’t think I ever heard a word come out of her mouth that was not friendly,” he says.

Marilyn Brown, Chandler’s granddaughter, says that people in Silverhill look up to and admire her grandparents. One of her childhood friends, who came from a large family, told Brown that her family “would have gone without food” during the Great Depression if it were not for the generosity of “Grandpa and Grandma

Chandler.”

“In my life,” Brown says, “I want to be like that.”

On most Sundays, Chandler walks to church in time for Sunday school, though she rides with Brown if it rains. When the *Companion* went to press in early December, she was still planning to help out with baking for the early morning Christmas Julotta service.

“We have a loving church and the people are so good to me,” she says.

Chandler’s husband, Leslie, died thirteen years ago. But it was the death of her daughter, Thelma, from a heart attack several years ago that really shook her.

“Your children are not supposed to die before you,” she says. “That like to kill me—that was the worst experience in my life.”

Chandler takes comfort in the hope that her daughter and husband have been reunited in heaven. “She was always Daddy’s girl and she is with her daddy now,” she says. “The Bible says you will know your own in heaven—and so I know I will see them.”

She hopes that God will give her strength to keep going “till he calls me home.” For now, her life is full with work, friends from church, and her family—Chandler has grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even a few great-great-grandchildren. And that, she says, is about all she can handle at her age.

“I told them that’s enough,” she says with a laugh. “I don’t want to have great-great-great grandchildren.” □

Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.