

HISTORY HELP

The Big Read: Collaborating in a “Big” Way

By Heidi Bleazey, 1897 Poe House Education Coordinator, Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex

Collaboration with other agencies can bring new attention, new visitors, and new ideas for creative programming to your historical organization. In recent years, the Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex has benefited from its collaboration with the Cumberland County Public Library as participants in the Big Read.

The Big Read

The Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. Organizations selected to participate in the Big Read offer month-long community-wide reading programs. Big Read grants allow libraries and their partners to select a book from a specified list and to promote reading by offering the community free materials, educational resources, and unique programming related to the chosen book.

Selected organizations receive grants ranging from \$2,500 to \$20,000 to support their Big Read projects. They also receive reader's guides, teacher's guides, audio guides, and publicity materials such as posters, banners, and bookmarks. Participating organizations also receive training on hosting Big Read events.

Museum/Library Partnership

In 2007, the Museum of the Cape Fear approached the county library to ask about the possibility of partnering in the Big Read. The library then applied for and was accepted into the Big Read program. The library selected the 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston.

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Themes in this book inspired the museum to host two lectures on African Americans in the early twentieth century. “Place and Possibilities: African American Society 1890-1920” focused on opportunities and challenges facing the black community in North Carolina. “Pillars of Strength: Black Women in the Early Twentieth Century” featured a discussion comparing the life of the lead character, Janie Crawford, to that of North Carolina's African American women.

In 2009 the library, which had suffered a fire in 2008, needed additional help to make the Big Read a success. The museum became a venue for some very creative programming relating to the chosen book, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. The museum served as the Big Read's kick-off site, hosting popular jazz musician Reggie Codrington and the Cape Fear Players, who performed scenes from the book. The museum also presented a film series, which included film noir favorites, the famous movie starring Humphrey Bogart, and a spoof of the story starring Peter Faulk.

The museum held an unusual but very popular program when it

hosted a live demonstration of falconry in Arsenal Park; visitors enjoyed watching falcons fly and learning about the history of this ancient sport. Visitors also enjoyed a presentation about pop culture in the 1930s.

In addition to offering new programming as part of the Big Read, the museum created a new exhibit. *The Maltese Falcon: A Big Read Exhibit* celebrated and illustrated the creation, publication, and cultural legacy of Hammett's classic crime novel. With rare photographs, correspondence, first editions, and pop culture curiosities, the exhibit offered an eloquent chronicle of one of America's most enduring works of fiction.

In 2010, the museum, the library, and other Big Read partnering organizations in Fayetteville will focus on Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers began her manuscript while living in Charlotte and continued writing after moving to Fayetteville.

The Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex will open an exhibit, *Connecting to Carson McCullers*, on March 27 to explore this southern author's impact on a

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nation’s conscience and her impact on the cultural arts. The museum is also offering two lectures inspired by themes in Carson’s book. On Saturday, March 27, at 2 p.m., the program “Segregation: Life Experiences” will offer a panel discussion about growing up in Jim Crow North Carolina from the perspective of black, Native American, and white people who experienced it. On Saturday, April 17, at 2:00 p.m., “Stretch Outs and Strikes” examines how changing social trends in the 1920s and the economic crisis of the 1930s impacted mill owners and their employees.

Through its participation in the Big Read, the Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex has presented new topics and extended our appeal to new visitors. Museum staff were challenged to think of creative programs that tied in with the chosen books, and as a result the museum has enjoyed increased visitation and visitor interest. In addition, the museum has found that it and other partner organizations in Fayetteville have all achieved greater visibility for their missions, gained a better understanding of our community’s needs, and combined our resources to help meet those needs.

The Big Read program has reached thousands of community members through creative programming, exhibits, free books, and educational resources. The museum is proud to have partnered with the Cumberland County Public Library and other cultural organizations to bring this program to Fayetteville.

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Applying to the Big Read Program

Each year the NEA opens the Big Read program for applications; applications are usually due in early February. Applicant organizations must be a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization; a division of state, local, or tribal government; or a tax-exempt public library. Applicant organizations must partner with a library (if the applicant organization itself is not a library). Applicants can select one of the thirty-one available reading choices. For more information, visit www.neabigread.org.

Please note that because of reduced funding, the NEA is limiting how many Big Read grants it will give out; in 2010 it will offer just 75 grants. But even if you are unable to win a Big Read grant, I encourage you to explore collaborative partnerships with other cultural organizations in your community. Collaboration multiplies resources, generates creativity, and opens new pathways to reach the communities we serve.

If you have questions about the museum’s partnership in the Big Read, please feel free to contact me at heidi.bleazey@ncdcr.gov or to call me at (919) 486-1330. In

the meanwhile, we hope to see you at an upcoming Big Read event at the museum. We invite you to learn more at www.cumberland.lib.nc.us or www.museumofthecapefear.ncdcr.gov.