

Alma Smith Jacobs

(1916–1997)

Beloved Librarian, Tireless Activist

“Your wisdom and skill have brought renewed light and learning to your fellow citizens. Your courage has brought great honor to all librarians.”

—Trustees of Mount Holyoke College



Alma Smith Jacobs served as head librarian of the Great Falls Public Library for almost twenty years before becoming Montana’s state librarian in 1973. Both of these achievements were firsts for an African American woman. Throughout her life, Jacobs demonstrated a commitment to education, community building, and racial justice.

Alma Victoria Smith was born in 1916 in Lewistown, Montana, to Martin and Emma Riley Smith. The family moved to Great Falls when Alma was a child. Jacobs later earned scholarships to study sociology at Talladega College in Alabama and library science at Columbia University in New York. Newly married to World War II veteran Marcus Jacobs, she returned to Great Falls and began working at the public library in 1946, becoming head librarian eight years later.

Jacobs worked to expand the library’s presence throughout Great Falls and across central Montana’s rural communities. Persevering through two failed bond ballot measures, Jacobs advocated for the funding and construction of Montana’s first modern library. It became known as *“the house that Alma built.”* Jacobs believed a good library was a community center where people of all ages and backgrounds could pursue the knowledge needed to learn new vocations or advance their careers. She would often say, *“The public library is the poor man’s university.”*

According to Christian Stevens, a professor at the College of Great Falls, *“Her leadership has provided Great Falls with more than just a new library; it has constantly revived this city’s important cultural character.”* She was recognized for this work through awards such as the Great Falls Woman of the Year

(1957), the Montana Librarian of the Year (1968), and the Montana Education Association Golden Apple (1971).

Jacobs worked to advance civil rights while underplaying her own racial identity, stating, *“I don’t consider myself the Negro authority in Great Falls or anyplace else. I resent being thought of as a Negro librarian. I would rather concentrate on being a good librarian.”* Nevertheless, she spoke out against segregation. She served as president of the Montana Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs and as a member of the Montana Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. With her sister, Lucille Smith Thompson, she documented the history of African Americans in Montana.

Jacobs, who died in 1997, has not been forgotten. In 2009, Great Falls dedicated the Alma Jacobs Plaza. In 2016, the Great Falls Public Library Foundation installed a mural of her on the library she helped build.



Alma Smith Jacobs, no date, unidentified photographer, image courtesy of the Great Falls Public Library