‘Unsung heroes’ remembered in black history exhibit at library

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LAFAYETTE — “Stagecoach” Mary stood on the page with her shotgun leaning against her hip.

“Nobody robbed the coach when she rode,” said Sherry Broussard, laughing, as she stood in front of the glass case that held a brief history of Mary Fields, a stagecoach driving pioneer woman who helped Ursuline nuns set up a mission in the Montana territory.

“I had a lady who told me she’s never seen a black cowboy. I told her that there’s not an area of life that blacks are not a part of,” said Broussard, a UL Lafayette special projects librarian. “Most students ask for the same information on the same heroes, but there are many others out there. We just have to shake the pages and pull them out.”

That’s why Broussard created the exhibit “Unsung Heroes, Untold Stories” at the Lafayette Public Library downtown to celebrate Black History Month. The exhibit opened Sunday afternoon with performances by the Progressive Baptist Church Children’s Choir and the Grace Hamilton Dance Group. Jennifer Miller told the story of Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper who helped blacks earn the right to vote.

Pictures and brief histories of Hamer; Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded a hospital and girls school for blacks; Lorraine Hansberry, the playwright who penned “A Raisin in the Sun”; and James Kelly, a cowboy nicknamed the “Ebony Gun,” joined the displays on better-known Chuck Berry, Duke Ellington, Hank Aaron and Josephine Baker.

“And here’s Bessie Coleman,” said Broussard, pointing to a picture of a young black woman in a soft leather aviator cap. “Everybody knows Amelia Earhart, but Bessie Coleman was the first black woman licensed to fly.”

Because schools in the states wouldn’t teach Coleman, she traveled to Paris, learned French and enrolled in flight school there. Her goal was to establish the first black flight school in America. She toured the country performing in air shows to raise money for the school and died during a flying exhibition.

A picture of Acadiana resident Jamal R. Broussard, an 18-year-old who earned his pilot license at 17, accompanies Coleman on the display board.

“It’s important for young people to know our history is ongoing,” she said.

On Sunday, Louella Riggs-Cook shared her passion for collecting black dolls with the group. She held “Baby Girl,” a rag doll with heart-shaped cheeks her grandmother made for her when she was 2 days old. The fabric doll and about a dozen handmade dolls are part of the history exhibit.

Dolls are a forgotten part of the culture, said Broussard and Riggs-Cook. Women would make the dolls to comfort children on the Underground Railroad, a secretive movement to usher slaves to free states and territories.

“The women made the dolls to protect the children and make them feel secure,” Riggs-Cook said.

The exhibit continues throughout the month in the Library Meeting Room.