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Bill Loveioy/Sentinel photos

Branch manager Lillian Dobbs covered her office and shelves in plastic on Monday night.

Rain, leaky roof close books in Live Oak Branch library

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LIVE OAK — The Cat in the Hat and Curious George are unexpected casualties of the winter rains.

The Live Oak Branch library has been closed for nearly three weeks, where

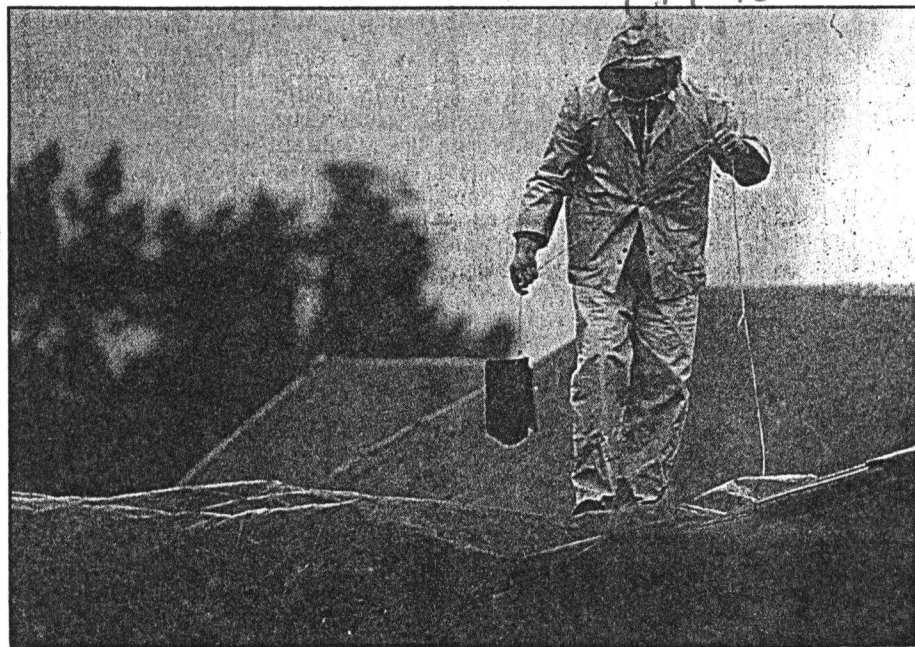
about 600 children's books have been ruined by a badly timed roofing job at East Cliff Center, the shopping center that houses the Live Oak Branch Library. The library caters mostly to children and families, many of whom have limited transportation to other libraries. Youngsters from nearby schools have used the library as an after-school study site while their parents are at work.

Branch librarian Lillian Dobbs was on the verge of tears as she faced Tuesday's downpour — the third to hit the library in nearly three weeks. Books, display cases and computers are draped in heavy plastic sheeting, and Dobbs is reluctant to remove it to assess the damage — because it might start raining again.

It started Dec. 22, when the water that had pooled on the roof after the heavy storms early in the week began to leak through.

"It was a virtual downpour," said Dobbs, reaching for a wastebasket to place under another leak. "We just started yanking books out and carrying them away. It's just been chaotic."

Center owner Ed Chirco seemed chagrined by the entire affair. He blamed county planners for holding up the permit he needed to re-do the roof. "We had planned to do this in the summer," he said, "but we were delayed by the permit, and it threw us into the rainy season."



A worker secures a tarp over the leaking library roof Monday.

Tuesday's deluge was worse, said Dobbs. Most of the juvenile fiction and nonfiction sections have been emptied, as well as the entire Spanish section.

Now that school has started, kids drop by after school to study. "I see their faces plastered on the glass," said Dobbs. "I don't know where they go when they find out they can't stay here."

Chirco said Tuesday that he hopes to

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have the roof complete "in a couple of days."

But Dobbs was skeptical. Even if the roof is finished by then, she said, the library staff will need a month to sort through all the books looking for mildew and dampness.

"You can't put a mildewed book in here," she said. "It infects everything around it. And once it starts to mildew, there's no way to stop it."

Rewiring will be required to repair light fixtures, which rainwater poured through early yesterday. And Dobbs thinks a new carpet will be needed, as well.

"How can you let infants and children crawl around on a mildewed carpet?" Dobbs asked. "You can't just spread chemicals around. To me, that's not a solution."

Ordinarily, the little branch does a brisk business. Some 50 parents and children ordinarily show up twice a week for story hour, and the library circulates about 4,500 items a month. Besides the children's book collection, there are adult paperbacks, videos, books on tape, newspapers and magazines and a pamphlet file on current issues and community resources.

"The real damage is our inability to serve the public," said Santa Cruz Libraries director Ann Turner. "It's just outrageous."

Patrons dropping by to check on the library's progress were discouraged by the mess.

"This takes incompetence to a whole new level," said delivery man Bob Holmes, shaking his head.

Denna Thomas lives in the

neighborhood, and her daughter, Tanya, used to volunteer there once a week. The entire family used the library, using the computer to check out books, from other branches that she could come back and pick up later.

Some library patrons have no way of getting to another branch, she added. "There's no way they're getting rides to Branciforte, because their mother works and she's exhausted when she gets home at night."

Lesley Lathrop, a longtime library volunteer, called the inundation "a disaster."

"It's a wonderful resource for the community," she said. "I see it used by all kinds of people; adults come in and read the papers and magazines, families come in to rent the videos, kids come and work on their projects.

"It's just a terrible thing. What I feel about it can't be in print."