

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY 1878 to 1977

By Mimi Ernst, Library Foundation Member

If you think the only items available for checkout at Columbus Public Library are books, you'd be right. That is, if you made that statement in 1878. The library is one of the oldest institutions in Columbus, whose growth mirrors that of the city itself. Here are a few highlights of its development and citizens who led the journey.

The unofficial beginning of the Columbus Public Library consisted of a few shelves containing some donated books in the reading room of the Columbus Presbyterian Church. Anyone who paid \$1 had the privilege of borrowing a book and was considered a member of the Library Association. When the number of books dwindled, the library would close, reopening when a sufficient number of books were returned or donated.

In 1900, the Women's Club convinced the City Council to house some books in City Hall and make them available to the public. William Becker, city clerk, served as the librarian. Popularity of the library justified its existence, but devoted library patrons like Mildilde Brugger wanted more. She convinced the City Council to pass an ordinance making the library a regular city department.

This new status qualified the library to receive financial support to purchase books. In addition, the Library Board of Trustees was established to set policy and recommend and evaluate the library director.

In 1915, Betty Weaver Gerrard donated a city lot as a memorial to her husband so the first public library in Columbus could be built. A grant of \$13,000 and a floor plan came from the Carnegie Library Foundation. This enabled the City to erect the building now used by Buss Auction and Realty Company on the southwest corner of 15th Street and 25th Avenue. Mrs. Kathryn Ericksen Lohr, of Walker, Minnesota, grew up in the house directly across the street from the Carnegie Library where The City Mission is now located. She recalled, "Every night after finishing the dishes, my two sisters and I ran across the street to the library, so we could read any book we wanted for a few hours. This gave my poor mother some much deserved

peace and quiet.”

The Carnegie style library served Columbus well for 61 years. However, by the mid-1960s, a larger facility was necessitated by the growth of Columbus’s population, consolidation of school districts, and an increase in student enrollment. Also the “information age” was on the horizon. Anticipating the need for a larger library facility, the Library Board knew they must draft a plan to raise money.

The first steps were to hire local attorney Bill Grant to draft the Articles of Incorporation, while Foundation members composed a set of by-laws. Together these two documents were certified by the Nebraska Secretary of State. The Library now had a Foundation, a 501(c)3, dedicated to raising funds for a new building.

Members of the first Library Foundation were E.H. Lohr, Norma Schaufelberger, Lucy Venable, Hanson Elliott, William Noll, Ron Novicki, Virginia Smith, Leo Dowd, and Lois Behlen. Little did they know the answer to their goal of finding greater space to house the library was a mere 15 feet away.

On December 8, 1976, the City purchased the two public power office buildings south of the Carnegie building. The former Consumer Public Power building was offered to the Library Board, if the Foundation could raise enough money to transform parts of the Consumer building into efficient library space. The Foundation succeeded in raising \$100,000 in a fairly short time thanks to many generous donations, including those from Library Director Winn Jacobs, William Curry, and Leo Dowd.

The remodeling was completed in late 1977 and the titles of the Consumer Public Power Building and the NPPD office building were turned over to the city. The new library building was extremely popular. Prior to its new location, the average number of annual checkouts was 70,000. During the first year in the new building 100,000 items were checked out.