

# Otsego District Library History

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Otsego's first dream of a library came in 1844 when the Township "fathers", rather reluctantly, appropriated a sum of \$25 for local library purposes. At first the books were kept in private homes, then they were moved to the bank building and on to the bakery until they were placed in a portion of the Township Clerk's office on the second floor of a dry goods store. Some of the town ladies later organized a Library Association and took over the promotion and ownership of the books.

The number of volumes started to grow and by 1876, there was a collection of 175 books which were then kept on display and loaned out from Julia Stoughton's Millinery Store. In 1878, the library had to be closed because so many of the books which had been borrowed had not been returned. When it re-opened, Librarian Mrs. Minnie Haines, was on duty for two hours each Saturday afternoon and was paid 25 cents for her labors. Each patron contributed a one dollar annual membership fee as a donation to the book fund.

As the town grew, so did the need for a more permanent building for the library. The Village Trustees agreed to provide a lot 60 foot square on the northeast corner of Orleans and Farmer Streets. The ladies then went to work to raise the monies for the building. The only restriction that the Village had made, was that the proposed edifice should be one that the community would be proud of; one that would cost at least \$900.

The money poured in from many sources. Various window washings, floor scrubblings, shoe shinings and other chores helped to swell the "bank." The ladies went forth daily with renewed strength and ingenuity; they were determined to reach their goal after the campaign had once been fully launched. They presented plays, socials, musicals and dances. But alas, in their over-enthusiasm, they unthinkingly irritated some of the local townspeople by donning men's clothing during one of their benefits. Then as their shining goal came into view, the "kissing booth" was set up. After a little publicized competition among the leading business and industrial men, the cherished reward was reached, but not without tarnishing Otsego's reputation, for the popular Police Gazette of Detroit blazingly printed a big headline

story of the spectacular, unforgivable events. The new building was officially dedicated in 1892.

In 1905, the Ladies Library Association withdrew its supervision and the Township then assumed ownership and control of the library. The total cost of the building and 1250 books was \$1500. The ladies graciously donated the money equally to area churches.

After the township took over the library, the building was raised up and a full basement was added. In 1909, a porch was built, giving more balance and distinction to the structure. Mrs. Haines continued as the first Librarian until 1911 when Mrs. C. I. Curry assumed the post. Several years later, Mrs. J. J. Jackson was awarded the honor. An accurate membership ledger was kept, recording the lists of books borrowed by each member. For a number of years, the Township could budget only \$150 annually for new books and this amount was carefully divided into the purchase of reference books, adult and juvenile fiction. By 1911, the local inventory had been sizeably increased to 3,000 volumes.

Miss Carrie French was named the next librarian and she remained here for 23 years, endearing herself to the many school children and area adults. For much of this time her salary was only \$300 a year and her task was a mission of love rather than a profitable position. During her term, she undertook to card-catalog the entire supply of books. She also helped extensively in planning the major remodeling in 1923, when new shelving, lights, and a children's reading room were provided.

The Library was first governed and supported as a Township library, but in 1918 when Otsego became a City, complications arose concerning the ownership and financing. At first, the Township retained control and provided for 2/3 of the expenses, but a few years later, the picture was reversed, with the City assuming the major role.

In 1943 Mrs. Lura Sanford assumed her duties. She was a former school teacher and was most efficient and cooperative as a librarian, giving special attention to those children or adults in need of reference material. In 1944, the Library observed its 100th birthday with an afternoon of happy reminiscing and fellowship by the local people and several out-of-town guests. In 1955 the Library was closed for a month of remodeling, when extensive interior and exterior painting was done, more efficient lighting and heating systems were added and new floor covering was laid. The Library's identifying features, the high pointed gables, were removed along with the chimney which had outlived its

usefulness. The entranceway was extensively improved with new side railings being added.

As the years went by, the town realized the need for a much larger and newer facility. Starting in 1961, funds were collected to begin heading toward that goal. In 1965, the City and the Township agreed upon the creation of a District Library Board, which legally removed the governance of the Library from the two municipalities. The Library Board was set up with two trustees appointed by the City Mayor, two by the Township Board and one by the School Board. Most of the new Board's business had to do with planning for the new library building. A "New Library Building Fund" and a "Library Trust Fund" were established in the mid-1960's. Contributions to these funds came from annual City and Township appropriations of \$2100 and \$900, respectively. The Ladies Literary Society held frequent booksales and other fundraisers, and City Commissioner Fritz Cronen even donated his annual Commissioner pay to the funds. Both of these funds were transferred from the City to the Library Board for management in 1966.

The Board also spent much time searching for the appropriate future library building site. A list of 14 possible locations were discussed, with the choices narrowed down eventually to the old Ward School property on West Morrell Street and the Terrace Apartments site on South Farmer Street. The Ward School was purchased from the School District for \$1, but ultimately the Board decided the Library should be located on the more visible Farmer Street site

The site was purchased for \$17,500 in May 1968. This cost included the amount needed for removal of the old apartment flats on the property. With the property in hand, the planning for the new building really began to take shape. Architect Robert Cain was hired in July 1968, and by August, he was able to provide preliminary drawings and an estimated construction cost. Since February 1968, Board members had publicly expressed the need for a millage to help with construction costs. A proposed two-year, one-mill levy was presented to the voters in both the City and the Township in August, where it easily passed in both locales. The Building Fund by this time neared \$50,000, and the Board had begun the process to apply for a large grant from the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). In order to begin construction by 1970, the Board would have to quickly get an application and the guarantee of a percentage of local matching funds into the federal government by the end of 1968. To appease the grantmakers, the Board had the guarantee of a two-year

millage that would generate roughly \$45,000, a two-year appropriation commitment from the City and Township totaling \$5800, and the amount already held in the two library funds.

In April 1969, the State Board of Education approved federal funds for the new library building in the amount of \$82,426. In addition, the Board requested and received a special appropriation of \$10,860 from the City and Township in 1970, which was the final amount required by the State before actually providing the LSCA money.

In January 1970, groundbreaking ceremonies were held for the new Otsego District Library on South Farmer Street during a slight snowstorm. Library Board members, city officials, and the architect were present to dig the first spadeful of dirt. Foundation pouring had begun at the site and completion of the new library was expected in the Fall.

In addition to the building project, the Library Board announced the hiring of Mrs. Klair Bates as head librarian. She assumed her duties on Monday, October 19, 1970. One of her primary duties in her first few weeks was to organize the transferring of material from the old library to the new building.

December 14, 1970 found friends of the Library, young and old and nearly 100 strong, pitching in to help move books into the new 7,000-square-foot library. Books were taken from the shelves in the old library, packed in numbered plastic grape lugs and taken the 1 1/2 blocks to the new facility in shopping carts and a panel truck donated by local businesses. The new library was dedicated in a ceremony involving school children, on May 19, 1971. The final cost for the new building including land acquisition, architect's fees, construction, equipment and furnishings came to \$235,517. Receipts totaled \$236,403.

The Library during the 1970's and 1980's grew considerably in its collection size, overall circulation, and activities. Between 1970 and 1980 the yearly circulation increased nearly 70%, and the collection size grew 65%. The foundation for an outstanding children's summer reading program was started in the early 1970's with the help of a new Friends of the Library organization. The ability to check out films, audio tapes, and art made the Library a more valuable asset to the community. Klair Bates continued as Librarian until retiring in 1984. Lyneta Nowak soon took over the reigns as Director and introduced technology into the Library by bringing in its first computers and eventually a modern, online card catalog and circulation system in 1993. Gone were the days of typing subject cards for new books and manually filing

checkout cards. The Internet first became available at the Library in 1996 and as of 2001, there were four Internet terminals available to the public and constantly in use.

From its beginning, the Library was financially dependent on annual appropriations from the City and Otsego Township. The appropriations were based on the state equalized valuations of property and distributed by the City and the Township proportionately. Annual library budgets were created to fit the amount expected from SEV values. This provided the Library with the necessary funding to operate, but often limited it in terms of updating collections, equipment, and technologies. Resources for those types of items were often left to the unreliable method of applying for grant money. Tired of the financial instability caused by this method and by erratic and unpredictable penal fine revenues, the Library set about resolving the situation by reorganizing itself under the new District Library Law, and by adding Alamo Township to the district.

In order to create a more reliable and equitable funding base, the residents of Otsego Township and Otsego City approved in March 1996 the passage of a 1-mill tax to be levied in perpetuity. Later, in August 1996, Alamo Township residents approved of their Township joining the Otsego District Library and they also approved of the same 1-mill tax levy. The new District Library Agreement and a steady, predictable and sufficient revenue source allowed the library Board to begin updating technology and equipment, and more importantly it gave them the ability to start planning on a long-range basis.

Today's Otsego District Library is an institution that serves its patrons and community with pride. It continues to offer the traditional resources associated with libraries of the past, but it also stays current with modern technology and modern methods of retrieving information and materials. Materials in the format of audiotapes, CD's, video tapes, DVD's and online databases are now all found at the library, and are offered at no charge. These are available not only due to an effort to stay current, but also because that is what patrons now expect from their library.

The Library is recognized for its superior Summer Reading Program and a strong dedication to the children of this community. It offers a continual stream of programs for patrons of all ages; programs that are educational and informative in nature and that attract a diverse body of patrons. It has become a gathering space for meetings, book discussion clubs, senior's groups, and toddler story hours. A rejuvenated Friends of the

Library group offers two tremendous booksales every year and has begun to once again offer their resources as an auxiliary of the library. The Friends also provides a strong corps of volunteers concerned for the well-being of the library and its patrons.

The Library today is more than just a building that holds books, magazines, and encyclopedias. It is a direct and prominent reflection of the community it serves. It displays the community's character and its heritage. It has become a true center of local activity and a valuable resource for the educational, cultural, and informational needs of the people it serves. The library is a public service-oriented and publicly-funded operation, and like any organization, careful and wise long-range planning is an absolute necessity. In order to enable the library to effectively fulfill its mission and objectives, the library Board is currently (2001) undertaking a space needs assessment study that will provide the data and information necessary in determining future space requirements.

1 See Appendix : "New Library Building Receipts, January 20, 1971."

2 Michigan PA 24, 1989