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Florida Library History Project

Manatee County Public Library System

The City of Bradenton will be celebrating its one-hundredth year of public library service in 1998. According to Mrs. Catherine Ramsey, a former Manatee County Library System director, who wrote *The History of Library Service in Manatee County*:

The library program got started in Bradenton in 1898 when Mrs. Julia Fuller set up a circulation library with a shelf of books in the millinery department of Mrs. Bass dry goods store...This was a rental library, books being loaned for 5 cents a week....before long [it] was moved to the store of Miss America Sudbury.

By 1904, the collection had outgrown this location and plans were begun to build a separate library building. In 1907, "a one-room concrete structure with a porch across the front" was opened for business with Mr. Lucien Stone presiding as librarian and "assisted by the ladies of the library association."

Both Bradenton and Palmetto, the town just across the Manatee River, formed Village Improvement Associations in 1900 and within these associations were library committees, which eventually evolved into the Bradenton Library Association and the Palmetto Library Association.

Like Bradenton, Palmetto's library first location was part of a commercial establishment. Originally housed above a grocery store, the library soon moved to a larger location over a drugstore. Though Palmetto was two years behind Bradenton in starting its first library in 1900, it managed to secure funds from the Carnegie Foundation before Bradenton and was able to build a Carnegie Library in 1914. Bradenton followed four years later with its Carnegie Library opening in October 1918.

The libraries in Bradenton and Palmetto supported by city taxes were free to city residents. County residents had to pay a non-resident fee. This system prevailed until the 1960s. At that time a number of factors combined to promote a major change in the structure of library service in Manatee County. Rapid population

growth in the County, inadequate library funding, an awareness by the citizens of the communities that they were being left behind as far as library services went, and an important initiative from the State Library to assist smaller communities, prompted civic activism that resulted in the formation of a county-wide system.

Won over by the argument that combining the smaller operating bodies into larger administrative units would increase efficiency, save money and most importantly make the libraries eligible for a variety of federal grant programs, the three governing bodies of Bradenton, Palmetto and Manatee County drew up a contract on October 7, 1963 and began operating as a system on a trial basis in 1964, renewable yearly, with all parties having the option to withdraw at any time. This was the beginning of free library service in Manatee County!

After successfully operating on this year-to-year basis for about seven years, it was decided that a permanent agreement would be developed with a single tax levy to support the system. Up to this time city residents were being "double-taxed" as they paid both city and county taxes for library service. In addition, all three governing parties were maintaining separate fiscal records, though Bradenton was in theory responsible for all record-keeping. In 1971, the State of Florida passed the "Home Rule" Bill and governor-appointed boards were eliminated in favor of county appointed ones. The "Manatee County Free Public Library Act" became law on June 23, 1971. The County System was now officially established on a permanent basis with a separate taxing district and tax levy to support it. The County Commissioners also became responsible for appointing members to the Library Board.

The first major result of the expanded funding now available from federal grants was a bookmobile which began service to remote areas of the County in August 1964. Serving rural areas was an important requirement in the LSCA federal guidelines. In addition, Florida Library Association Standards stated that "no person should be more than 15 minutes driving time from a library outlet." The year 1966 brought a Talking Books program for the blind to the Palmetto Library. Besides these special services that were being offered for the first time, the libraries' collections were growing significantly and additional professionally trained staff were hired. As a consequence, these positive changes brought about major growth in library use, higher circulation and many more registered borrowers from the county and the city.

Federal, state and county funds along with local initiatives brought significant growth and expansion to the Manatee County Library System in the 1960s and 1970s. The Bayshore area was chosen as the first branch site and opened in September 1967. The next branch to be opened in 1969 was a small one on East Ninth Street in a building donated by the Manatee City School System. Assisted by federal and county funds, Palmetto was able to buy a lot and build a badly needed new building in 1969. Bradenton was making plans for a major expansion and was looking for a new site, as well. Island residents were decimating the bookmobile's collection, which made it clear that a branch was needed there. The Island Friends of the Library were instrumental in raising funds to match federal funding requirements and renovating a storefront in Holmes Beach. The Holmes Beach Branch opened in March 1970. In 1971, a senior citizens program was set up and the Score Brand Library and reading room was established on 12th Street. Again, federal grant money helped and bought a collection of "sightsaving" books for the branch.

The large modern Manatee County Central Library on the Manatee River opened its doors in April 1978. In her History, Catherine Ramsey, Library Director at the time, tellingly describes this major event:

"In terms of the size of the building and the cost of construction, it is by far the largest building program embarked on in the entire history of the library program in the County....This work has been difficult, and at times painful and agonizing for both the Board Members and the County Commissioners, to say nothing of the Director who seemed all too often to be caught in the cross-fire."

Except for Anna Maria Island, where a new library was built in 1983 to replace the storefront facility, the 1980s were not a time of growth for the library system. Even the bookmobile service was discontinued to save badly needed funds.

It was not until the 1990s, during the tenure of the current Director, John C. Van Berkel, that the system was able to begin work on expansion plans again. Rapid population growth in interior regions of the formerly rural county made new library branches a necessity. In 1991, the Braden River Branch opened serving residents in the southeastern part of the county. The Rocky Bluff Branch opened in Ellenton on the northeastern side of the county in April 1994. The South Manatee Branch on Bayshore had outgrown its facility and reopened in a much larger building in July 1996. One year later in July 1997, Braden River moved into

its new building. As the Talking Books Library continued to grow and gain patrons, it moved to increasingly larger quarters, from Palmetto, to Central and finally to South Manatee.

From 1900 to 1994 Manatee County's population grew from 4,663 to 228,283. Likewise, library service grew from two separate small city libraries across a river from each other, to a countywide system with a large central facility and five branches positioned strategically within the 747 square miles of the County.

MISSION AND GOALS

Today the Manatee County Public Library System's mission statement is as follows:

The Manatee County Public Library System seeks to provide a responsive, innovative, proactive program that is capable of upgrading the educational, cultural, and recreational quality of life in the community. This is done by featuring current high-demand, high-interest materials in a variety of formats; providing timely, accurate, and useful information, and encouraging children to develop an interest in reading and learning. (Library Policy Manual)

Following the guidelines of the Public Library Association, the Manatee County Public Library System has defined and prioritized its roles to match the community it serves. Because Manatee County has a varied population and a significantly large population of retired persons, the Long Range Planning Task Force chose as the library's primary role to be a Popular Materials Library. Secondarily the library system is to serve as a Reference Library and as the Preschooler's Door to Learning.

In support of its chosen mission and designated roles, the library's Collection Development Policy clearly explicates how the collection is to be shaped and prioritized. Within their policies is a clear "Freedom to Read" statement as well as procedures for handling any questions regarding collection content. Also included is a statement on protecting confidentiality of patron records.

In the library system's five-year plan (1995-2000), the major goals of the library are outlined. Included here are: completing the automation process; improving

methods of requesting and transferring materials between facilities; and increasing hours of operation. Also mentioned are: increasing outreach initiatives; a post-automation staff reorganization, and improved coordination among the Board of Trustees, Friends' groups, the Library Foundation and other support groups.

The Manatee County Public Library System has clearly documented its attempts to use and follow established library standards. It is focusing on its mission and roles and working within guidelines put forth by the national and state library associations. The children's collection and the special programs offered are outstanding and demonstrate that a secondary role means focused attention not neglect. The up-to-date and heavily used reference collection also exemplifies how establishing roles can improve services.

Besides the popular reading collection, the reference collection and children's services, the Manatee County Public Library System offers a variety of other services. The library has an audiovisual collection with feature film, educational and instructional videos and a compact disc and cassette tape collection with popular and classic music, books on tape and instructional tapes. Mentioned earlier in the History of the system is the Talking Books Program which serves the blind and physically handicapped of both Sarasota and Manatee counties. An agreement with the Sarasota Public Libraries provides financial support from both counties.

In addition to basic reference service, the Adult Services Department at the Central library provides access to government documents, literary criticism sources, nationwide telephone directories, consumer information and interlibrary loan service. They serve as reader's advisors, conduct library tours, book talks and other special information programming. The Eaton Florida History Room at the Central Library is a research collection with in-depth resources on Old Manatee County. There is also a Genealogy Collection with many resources for tracing ancestors.

ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION

The Manatee County Public Library System now operates under the direction of a five-member Board of Trustees appointed by the County Commissioners. The Board serves in an advisory capacity to the Library Services Manager and meets yearly, unless requested otherwise. The Library Services Manager heads the

system and directly manages the Central Library. He reports to the Director of Information Services which is a Department in the County government structure headed by the County Administrator. The five branches are headed by Branch Supervisors who report to the Outreach Services Supervisor who is directly under the Library Services Manager.

In the fiscal year 1995/96 there were: 27 librarians with ALA accredited master's degrees; the equivalent of 40 full-time staff; 11 full-time volunteers; and varying numbers of public service workers. Together the volunteer and public service worker hours came to 22,711 for the year.

Library operating expenditures for 1995/96 totaled \$3,478,493. Of this \$1,887,395 were for staff, \$383,121 for materials and \$1,207,977 for all other operating expenditures including equipment, plant operations and telecommunications. During the same period the library's operating income was made up of \$3,786,495 from County property taxes and \$306,741 from State Funds and \$316,553 from other income.

In addition there are active Friends groups at all of the libraries in the system. They support the libraries in a variety of ways, including fundraising, special programs and political action. The Library Foundation with a 31 member Board of Directors and 15 member Advisory Committee supports the library with major fundraising activities. The Foundation makes a significant contribution in funding library services not available through traditional tax base funding. The Friends and Foundation publish a newsletter reporting on news, events and activities at all the libraries.

STATISTICS

More than a million library materials circulated in fiscal year 1995/96 in the county library system. Even at the smallest branch, Rocky Bluff, 40,812 materials circulated. There were estimated to be 869,661 patron visits and 235,999 reference questions. Approximately 1605 meetings and programs were held and with 32,314 persons in attendance. In addition, 287 special outreach programs were conducted outside of the library with 12,366 persons attending.

The implementation of an automated online library system in July 1996 and the

subsequent inventory and barcoding of all library materials brought the total number of book volumes to about 306,252, considerably less than previous figures based on the card catalog. The total collection size including microforms, government documents, audio/visual materials and miscellaneous materials currently totals more than half a million. As the database is cleaned up the collection size figures will change. In addition, there are large uncataloged paperback collections that are not included in the total. As of April 1996, there were 435 serial titles including periodicals and newspapers in any format and 795 serials subscriptions.

The new automated system required reregistering all borrowers. The current number of registered borrowers is 40,000+. Before automation, the number was 90,000+. The numbers are increasing daily as patrons make the switch from their old library card to the barcoded version.