

GREENWOOD

MONTHLY

March 2017



Commemorative Issue

100TH
ANNIVERSARY

Greenwood Public Library

connect. experience. imagine.

EST 1917

Cheryl Dobbs
Director,
Greenwood Public Library



Clara May, 3, is building dexterity while learning to use the keyboard in the Children's area.

+ Greenwood Public Library:
A Flame Burning
for
100
Years

Writer / Tia Nielsen
Photographer / Forrest Mellott

Greenwood presented itself with an extraordinary Christmas gift in 1963. The first publicly funded building dedicated solely for the use of the city library opened December 26. Built on the northern most edge of the Old

**Greenwood Public Library
Timeline:**

■
The Greenwood Public Library has a richly interesting past. Please follow along for highlights from our 100 years

City Park, the new library was an unusual trapezoidal shape in two levels with the front steps facing Meridian Street.

The 46-year-old library collection had been housed in the Polk House Community Center at 2 N. Madison Avenue since 1920. The 1963 Christmas library owned 15,620 books and 2,660 registered borrowers. This was a stunning change from the first time the Greenwood Public Library squeaked opened its doors in 1917.

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A BOOK?

Crisis after crisis led up to February 6, 1917. When Greenwood Public Library opened its doors on the second floor of Cook's General Merchandise store, it was in trouble. As inauspicious as its location was, going up the dark, narrow steps to Cook's Hall, in the building east of the corner of Main Street and Madison Avenue, there was a bigger problem. Hoping to solve it, the community was invited to a celebration reception, and they were also asked to donate books. For the library did not own any books yet.

The local library board had requested a loan of up to 100 books from the Indiana Public Library Commission (PLC), as this was one of its regular functions. The PLC worked to establish libraries across Indiana because books were not commonly owned then.

A book generally cost a full day's wages for the average working person.

However, less than a week before the Greenwood Library was set to open, Miss Hazel Wishard, a member of the founding library board, received a letter from the PLC stating that there were no books left available to loan.

As Wishard was also the Greenwood High School principal, she arranged for a loan of 35 books from the school library instead. In a book about the history of Greenwood Schools, she states that over the course of the years those books were returned to the school library.

Thus, the indomitable library board invited the community to help them. A book shower ensued February 6, to fill those nearly bare shelves. After those previous years of struggle, including the loss of a Carnegie grant in 1916 which would have built a library for free, and the painful loss of two court cases brought by the Greenwood Town Board against the local library board over the site choice for that Carnegie library, the determined, optimistic library founders figured out a way to open the doors.

Beginning with the 35 books borrowed from the high school, the library had numerous citizens donate books. A ledger documents the 33 titles along with the names of each donor contributing. Two more books came in that February for a combined collection of 70 books for the 80 registered users. In March, the nascent collection grew with classics like *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and works of Indiana authors Gene Porter Stratton and Booth Tarkington. The Greenwood Public Library was on its way!

THE LAND SPATE OF 1916-1917

Though various citizens had doggedly worked for decades to secure a public library easily accessible and free to all citizens, it did not become a reality until that cold winter day in 1917. Dr. J.A Craig was a key leader in seeking any workable solution to establish a publicly-funded library. (Craig Park is named in his honor.) He had sold the northeast corner of his property on Broadway to the library board for one dollar as a site



1917: Original Greenwood Public Library

1920-1963 :
Polk Community House



1963 : GPL first building

1975 : GPL entrance





Left: Reading-related hands on activities keeps this little guy and his helper busy.

Above: Director Cheryl Dobbs displays duplicates of many of the first books generous local citizens donated to the Greenwood Public Library on its opening day in February 6, 1917. At a minimum, books then cost an average worker's days wages.

Facing Page: When GPL is open, the parking lot I full!

for a library. It was immediately east of the railroad tracks on land that is now the property of the Southside Art League.

The land Craig donated to the library board secured a nearly free site on which a Carnegie-funded library could be built. Steel industry magnate Andrew Carnegie built 2,509 libraries all over the country as gifts to communities, the majority of them built from 1901 to 1918. Greenwood had applied for one of those grants. Perhaps because the library board had a split vote on whether to build on the Craig land, the Greenwood Town Board and the Indiana Public Library Commission secretary, Mr. H.N. Sanborn vehemently disagreed with the site. Sanborn perceived the site was "a fatal choice" for the success of the library and reported

his view to Mr. James Bertram, Mr. Carnegie's secretary. Sanborn said the site was seven blocks from the business center of the city with its bank, post office and stores. Sanborn also wrote in a letter that he had urged local protestors to work vigorously to defeat the acceptance of the Craig site.

Dr. Craig countered with a map showing that the site was only two blocks from the geographical center of town and that hundreds of people flocked to his land annually for weeks of shows and concerts that he sponsored for the community. He tried mightily and, at times, testily in letters to convince local and state PLC officials of the wisdom of his offer. There were three other potential sites, but there was no money to purchase them. Nor was a library tax

levy established in September 1916 to fund any type of library. Wishard wrote that the Carnegie Corporation declined to build a Greenwood library because it did not approve of the original blueprints. New blueprints were submitted in May 1917, but the Carnegie decision remained the same. It is worth noting that Franklin did qualify for a Carnegie grant in 1913 and that became the site of their first 10,000 square foot library.

LOCAL BUSINESS TRANSFORMS TOWN AND LIBRARY

The provision for Greenwood's future library needs did take root decades earlier though. In 1872 newlywed couple J.T and Laura Polk began a small canning business from their home in Greenwood. It prospered quickly drawing from the ample



1960s :
GPL Childrens Room



1978: GPL offered sewing patterns



1990-91: Demolition for remodel wall



supply of produce from county farmers. Polk Canning Factory became the biggest cannery west of Baltimore. Polk Dairy was also begun to handle all the remnant plant leftovers. Those businesses appear to have quadrupled Greenwood's population to 1,608 by 1910.

Polk's abundant success led to a community bequest announced at J.T's funeral in February 1919. A spacious community house was to be built from his estate for the benefit of Greenwood. Included were the town's first indoor gym, an indoor swimming pool under the gym floor, public meeting rooms and a 500-seat auditorium with a stage. The first-floor room with plenty of windows was set aside for the public library. One year later in February 1920, the J.T and Laura Memorial Polk Community House was dedicated. After the library's first three traumatic years, it finally had a stable, new home.

NIGHTMARE ON MAIN STREET

Those first three years brought difficult stops and starts. The United States entered the First World War April 6, 1917. The small community saw many of its youth march off to war. By October, the very contagious, often fatal smallpox epidemic arrived in Greenwood. The library, schools and churches were closed from October 1917 to January 1918, according to the two histories written by Hazel Wishard. The worldwide flu epidemic came to Greenwood that October. It quickly took the lives of two local students, while dozens of students and teachers also fell ill. Again, the library, schools and churches were closed, this time for five weeks. When the flu returned in force a month later, everything closed for another two weeks.

Years later, Wishard, Greenwood's longest serving librarian (1928-1956) and the former educator, wrote about those lean three years in Cook's Hall. "Only those who remember the dark narrow stairway and the bleak, barnlike, baseburner heated room that was never warm in winter and unbearably hot in the summer can appreciate the determination that kept this project going." However, Wishard and the entire seven-member library board had considerable optimism that paid dividends. Only 15 years later, in 1932, Wishard wrote that the library then had "six thousand volumes with a circulation of over 25 thousand."

TOUGH TIMES 1930s to 1950s

The library grew from 1920 to 1928 due to more prosperous economic times. When Wishard took over as a librarian in 1928, she could not have foreseen what difficulties lay ahead. She struggled daily to keep the library funded through the Depression Era 1930s as well as during and after WWII. But ways were found to add books. Thus, by her retirement at the end of 1956, the biggest issue was where to put books.

At Polk House books were placed on window ledges and every nook and cranny. The new librarian, Mrs. Mildred Stahl then became the newest advocate for a genuine library building in 1957. The need grew "to such proportions," wrote Stahl, "that it was decided that a more commodious building should be built to accommodate the overcrowded library."

Securing an affordable, appropriate site near downtown took some debate once again. Eventually, the town parks department donated land. The accumulated final cost



Remodeling challenges!

2016:
View from Old City Park



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Come in
Sit Down

Discover



of the building was \$119,000. The grand opening the day after Christmas 1963 was a time of joyous celebration. A full-fledged dedication ceremony occurred April 12, 1964, Greenwood's 100th anniversary year. Wishard was so thrilled that she traveled from her retirement home in L.A. to attend. Her hometown's population had grown to nearly 8,000. She was one of the two still living, founding library board members from the 1917 beginning.



townships struggled to balance the needs of all county library patrons. Over time an equitable way was instituted to handle differing library taxing districts and shifting city and rural boundaries with a compatible reciprocal borrowing system. Finally resolved, Cheryl Dobbs, Greenwood Library Director, explains, "Once you have a library card from your home library, then you can receive borrowing privileges at any Johnson County library."

FORTY YEARS GROWING

Happily, preparations for this new library building launched explosive growth for what had been a consistently struggling, crisis-laden public library. The first Friends of the Library group was begun in 1962 by local historian Harold Toombs. Donations ranged from 50 cents to \$50 from individuals and local businesses. Community enthusiasm gathered funds for items not in the library budget. Those needs included landscaping, handrails for outside steps, desks, tables and chairs, book racks and the checkout desk. Mrs. Stahl also solicited funds for new books and donations of gently used books. Her focus was on collecting materials about the latest scientific technologies developing. The community responded with thousands of books.

Wishard wrote in a letter to librarian Mildred Stahl in November 1961, "I want to congratulate you and the Board for at last making it possible. It seems everything worth while has to be produced accompanied by a struggle. But it may be that makes it sweeter when accomplished."

Only a dozen years later, the library added a significant addition, tripling the size of the library. By the March 1975 dedication, the city's population was closer to 19,000 and the addition cost was \$472,368. Further additions were added in 1991 and 2002. The work was so extensive in 1991 that the library temporarily moved to the lower level of the east end of the Walker building on the corner of Market Plaza and Madison Avenue. NAPA Auto Parts is housed in that location today.

OPEN FOR ALL

Funding a public library brought myriad challenges. Usually, it meant far too few funds for the value of the vision. As Johnson County population grew, the county

A serious financial crisis hit GPL in December 2011. The library was in jeopardy. Newly installed Director Cheryl Dobbs sparked the community to life. Greenwood citizens rallied as if personally attacked and staged fundraisers to keep their library afloat. Civic organizations also made timely donations while the Library Board strategized new ways to build a solid balanced budget that allowed for future growth. The finances were stabilized within a few years. The library charted a new course that has proved to be successful.

A SIMPLE CARD OPENS ADVENTURES

What has fueled the flame of love for learning and the ability to discover a bigger world through a library? People love connectedness — that personal touch. You can always tell when the library is open because the parking lot is full. Greenwood has built much of its unity around the library, where the tools for learning are on hand. Learning is human and hands on, it's heartwarming and personal. The Greenwood Library offers all that through friendly staff willing to answer or research questions or to teach how to use a computer or to discuss a book or film. Community rooms host seminars and meetings for many different groups. Children's programs incorporate the latest techniques in childhood reading development. Free streaming of films and recordings, use of free passes to the Indiana State Museum and so much more can be found via a simple library card. Within those walls, or through personal digital devices, surprising adventures await.

Where else can you go for all those treasures for a bit of tax money per household per year? Even a great coffee-house can't offer so much value.

Beginning a public library was not for the faint of heart. Nor is running one now. But for the public, it is easy. Come in. Sit down. Discover. ■

Facing Page: Ann Guthrie, Assistant head Children's Librarian engages the children in active reading preparation games. From the back of the room, the parents observe and learn new ways to teach reading readiness

