

A Commemorative History

From the address of the Honorable Peter B. Nelson at the dedication of the Racine Public Library, September 9, 1897—

"Ladies and Gentlemen:

The city of Racine holds a public reception this evening and invites thereto every man and woman, every girl and boy, within its border, to meet the most learned of all nations, to greet the most delightful storytellers and to listen to them relate their experiences and express their thoughts...and not only enchant but improve the minds of all who grasp this golden opportunity... So it seems to me that as we enter the door of our public library, we should feel that we were upon hallowed ground...This should indeed in every sense of the word be a "public" library. Here there can be no distinctions. No class, no creed, can prevent any person who so desires, meeting either king or nobleman, statesman or philosopher, poet or critic...Here has been established the university of the city of Racine. It is the keystone of our public school system, and if by force of circumstances a young man or girl is prevented from continuing his or her education in the public schools, nothing will prevent him from [here] continuing that true education which will fit him for life's work and render more enjoyable the years that are to come."

To the Reader

The objective of the Centennial Committee on Library History was to write a brief history of the Racine Public Library in celebration of its centennial year. As we sorted through the mass of information that tells the library's story, we quickly discovered that it would be impossible to include all the people, events, and services that had an impact on the library's growth and development over the years, and, at the same time, produce a modest, pamphlet-sized commemorative within the scope of our budget. In the end, we chose to prepare a time line that highlights the cooperation between the library and the community it served, from its earliest beginnings to its 100th anniversary. It is this unflagging spirit of cooperation between the public library and Racine area citizens that has been important—even necessary—for the progress the Racine Public Library has achieved during its first century.

Through the years, concerned citizens have shared a common belief—that the public library and its services are necessary ingredients in our community's quality of life, and that all citizens are entitled to enjoy the pursuit of lifelong learning. With their contributions of time, talent, and money, local citizens have helped make the Racine Public Library an institution that the Honorable Peter B. Nelson in 1897 declared to be "the university of the city of Racine."

In this time line, we salute the people whose determination and support first brought the library into being as a public institution in Racine. We proudly highlight the Racine Public Library's pioneering of innovative services, which have since been widely adopted by other public libraries, and the unwavering concern our citizens have demonstrated and the action they have taken, collectively and individually, on their library's behalf.

Our task completed and shared with you in this document, we urge you not only to celebrate the past, but also to look to the future—a future in which the Racine Public Library and its community will continue the successful traditions of its past, using the developing technologies of the present.

Centennial Committee on Library History
Racine Public Library
Racine, Wisconsin
1997

1895—Citizens Help Establish a Free Public Library in Racine

One of the charter purposes of the Woman's Club of Racine was to help establish a free public library, and in 1895, a group of citizens, spearheaded by the Woman's Club, organized a Library Association for this very purpose. Due in large part to the untiring efforts of these citizens over the next two years, the city council passed a resolution to levy a .25 mill tax for library support. Subsequently, a nine-member library board was appointed. With funding, however small, and a governing body, the establishment of a public library was underway.

The Woman's Club efforts in helping the public library became a tradition that continued over the course of the next hundred years. In addition to the Woman's Club, many other civic organizations, such as the Junior League of Racine, Racine Children's Theatre, Junior Chamber of Commerce, and the Rotary Club, have made unselfish, significant contributions of time, labor, and money to the Racine Public Library over the past century.

1897—Racine Public Library Opens Its Doors

On Thursday afternoon and evening, September 9, 1897, about a thousand of the 30,000 men, women, and children who lived in Racine crowded into the city's first free public library, both before and after a formal dedication ceremony at City Hall, which was then just across the street. The new library was on the ground floor of the McClurg building—now Main Place—a building located downtown at the corner of Third and Main, in a block owned at the time by M.M. Secor. There was only one room—but what a room! It was finely fitted out with multi-colored ceramic tile on the floor, with marble-paneled wainscoting and embossed "iron" walls above, and topped overall by a patterned tin ceiling, from the center of which hung a magnificent chandelier resplendent with 52 globes in gleaming glass shades. Nearly four thousand books in cases and nooks surrounded the central reading area. The Racine Public Library was the proud achievement of civic effort that was worthy of celebration then and commemoration today. The elegant little reading room was only the first of many such achievements to be recounted in our library's hundred-year history.

The Racine Public Library opened
its doors
in 1897 in rented quarters
at 245 Main Street.



1898—Children's Reading Rooms and Storytimes Flourish from the Start

The philanthropy of the Woman's Club continued through the years, the amount of reading materials donated accelerating with the ever-increasing volume of library use. By 1900, the total number of school-age children enrolled in children's storytimes was 664—more than double the number in 1898. Total annual attendance in 1900 at children's programs was 4,846, while the total number of books checked out was 4,114. Operating expenses—excluding money paid for new books—amounted to a mere 2.5 cents per afternoon per child.

1898—Library Becomes Federal & State Document Depository

The Racine Public Library, newly designated as a depository for publications of the United States government, began receiving free weekly shipments of federal documents in 1898. In later years, the library also became a regional depository for publications of the state of Wisconsin. Understandably, public access to the information available in government documents is of tremendous benefit to the community. Today, the Racine Public Library remains a depository for government documents, with more than 95,000 federal, state, and local government publications in its collections available to the public.

1901—Library Seeks Funding for New Building

With the library's rapid growth, the single rented room in the McClurg Building soon became overcrowded, and the library board sought funding for construction of a new building with larger quarters. With much hard work and some good fortune, this goal would be achieved.

1904—First Carnegie Library in Racine Opens

Racine citizens braved blustery winds and a foot of snow during three days in the middle of March, to marvel at the beauty of their new library building, before even a single book was allowed to be checked out of it. The library had been built with a grant of \$50,000 from Andrew Carnegie, the multimillionaire and steel tycoon from Pittsburgh, who turned philanthropist as he grew older and financed libraries throughout our nation during the late 1800's and early 1900's. Designed in the Renaissance Revival style and ornamented in molded terra cotta by John L. Mauran, a St. Louis architect, it was labeled "the Library Beautiful" back then by the Western Library Association. It served as Racine's central library for 54 years, and still stands at the corner of Seventh and Main Streets. Now the home of the Racine Heritage Museum, its elegant twin fireplaces, classical Ionic columns, coffered plaster ceilings, and gracious wooden staircases can still be seen.

The first Carnegie library building in Racine opened in 1904 at 701 S. Main Street.



1904—Library Reaches Out to the Community: Extension Services Begin

After its opening in the Carnegie building in 1904, one of the first goals of the Racine Public Library was to expand and extend those library services into the community. The Library Extension Department began to service the local public schools by placing book collections in Howell, Washington, and Lincoln schools, and by starting a deposit collection of 35 books which was loaned to the Life Saving Station (later the Coast Guard Station). In 1910, library extension services were expanded to include factories, hospitals, and fire stations.

The Northside Branch was opened in 1906 in the Northside Boys' Club to bring the resources of the library to people living away from the center of the city. This branch served the public until 1922, when the Washington Branch, which served both the school and the general public, was opened in Washington Junior High School. During this time, other branches were also established to meet the needs of the central, west, and southside residents. A Central Branch was started in Lincoln School and later transferred to the Central Association (in later years known as Family Service of Racine), where it continued to serve the public until 1921.

Today, the Racine Public Library continues to meet our community's needs by placing outreach collections of library materials at city of Racine fire stations; seven community centers; senior citizen centers and nursing homes; the Racine County Jail, Detention Center, and Jury Room; Vision House; the Love and Charity Mission; St. Mary's Medical Center Inpatient Rehabilitation Center; and the Women's Resource Center.

1910—Library Hires First Reference Librarian

Although the library had been providing reference service to the public since it opened its doors in 1897, the first "official" reference librarian was hired in 1910.

1914—Second Carnegie Library in Racine: Junction Branch Opens

On a balmy Memorial Day in 1914, the Racine Junction Advancement Association dedicated a branch library at Washington and Hamilton near the Racine Junction, financed by a Carnegie grant of \$10,000. The Junction Branch (later called South Branch, and then Uptown Branch) was designed by the local architectural firm of Guilbert and Funston. One of the few public buildings in Racine constructed in the Prairie style, so indigenous to the Middle West, it served as a branch library for 74 years. Although it is now privately owned, the building still stands, in Uptown, at Washington Avenue and South Memorial Drive. Racine was one of only a few communities in the United States (58 out of some 1,420) to receive a Carnegie grant for more than one library building.

The second Carnegie library building in Racine opened in 1914 at what is now 1407 S. Memorial Drive.



1922—Library Branches Out Across Town—and Around the County

1922 saw the opening of branch libraries in Franklin and McKinley Junior High Schools, in addition to the newly opened branch in Washington Junior High School. When the new Fratt School was planned in 1925, a provision was made to house a library to serve both the school population and general public. Branches were also established in the newly built Horlick High and Mitchell Junior High Schools. Today, the school district provides libraries at all public elementary and secondary schools to serve children from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Still, students find the materials and services provided by the public library an invaluable resource in their attainment of academic success, and they continue to use the public library throughout their lives.

1922 also brought the beginning of the County Library Service, when a contract was signed with the Racine County Board of Supervisors by which the library board agreed to furnish library service to the residents of the county for an annual county appropriation plus a charge per book or periodical circulated. This circulation cost was charged back to the individual tax unit.

In 1971, Wisconsin legislators passed a bill providing for the establishment of county and multi-county library systems, with state aid as an incentive to form such a system. In 1979, the Racine Public Library became a member of the Racine County Library System (RCLS), which consisted of five independent member libraries and was supported by state aid and a county tax levied on municipalities without libraries.

Today, the Racine Public Library is the resource library for the Lakeshores Library System, created in 1983, which is a federated system serving fifteen public libraries in both Racine and Walworth counties.

1927—The Emily A. Lee Bequest: The Mother of All Donations

The Woman's Club's efforts to organize a public library and to obtain Racine's first Carnegie grant, and the Junction Advancement Association's activities in obtaining a second Carnegie grant and opening the Junction Branch library, are good examples of how groups of people working together have brought about positive change in our community. But, even individual citizens have the power to create significant positive change in their communities.

For example, the expansion of library services to the community has been greatly enhanced by the use of funds donated to the library as gifts, memorials, and bequests. Income from the Emily A. Lee bequest is especially noteworthy for helping the library expand its services and programming. Emily A. Lee, widow of the public library's first board president Charles H. Lee, died in 1927. She bequeathed \$100,000 to the Racine Public Library in her last will and testament, stipulating that the gift not be used for operating expenses, but as a permanent endowment, the income to be used for the purchase of books and equipment. Since then, the Racine Public Library has used Lee funds for many purposes, including: to supplement the book budget, to purchase equipment, to initiate a collection of phonograph records, to sponsor a Great Books Discussion Group, to present film viewing and discussion programs, and to present the Emily A. Lee Lecture Series—a series of free public programs that brought to Racine renowned speakers such as Archibald Macleish and Henry Kissinger.

Besides civic groups and well-to-do individuals like Emily Lee, citizens of average means have also made significant contributions to the library for the various services for which additional support was needed. Innumerable small donations have been made over the years by individuals who wish to remember and honor their loved ones by contributing money toward the purchase of materials for the library's collections.

Emily A. Lee, wife of first library
board
President, Charles H. Lee,
bequeathed
\$100,000 to the library in 1927



1927—Library's First Official Recording of Reference Statistics

1927 is the first year that reference statistics appeared in the library's annual report; 4,775 questions were answered. Almost seventy years later, in 1996, the Adult Department responded to 85,044 requests for information, the Children's Department handled another 33,600, and the Bookmobile 8,198.

1932—Library Pioneers First Preschool Storytime in the U.S.

In cooperation with the Junior League, the Racine Children's Theatre, and the Woman's Club, the Racine Public Library pioneered the first storytime in the United States for preschool children from three to five years old. The first group of 28 preschoolers attended a storytime session, conducted by children's librarian Alice Davitt (Schowalter), at the Racine Public Library on February 10, 1932, at 11:00 a.m.

According to a mayoral proclamation honoring Racine Public Library's national leadership in developing preschool storytime, signed by the Honorable Stephen F. Olsen, February 8, 1982: research had disclosed no preschool storytime service anywhere in the country any earlier than the 1940's; the Racine Public Library's service had operated continuously without interruption since its origin in 1932, and it had been accelerated year after year to reach more and more children. "This library program," Olsen proclaimed, "has pioneered in the nation as an innovator in reaching preschoolers with pleasureable exposure to books and stories, thus encouraging reading readiness."

In a second mayoral proclamation of the same date, it was noted that Peg (Doolin) Martin, who was one of the preschoolers in the first group of children served by this program in 1932, had been involved with the Racine Public Library since 1949 as a librarian and a volunteer in the library's preschool storytimes. In addition, Peg Doolin Martin, as the "Story Lady," hosted a series of storytimes aired on a local radio station in the 1950's. Peg, who is still a children's librarian in Racine, and conducts the library's outreach storytime sponsored by the Friends of the Library, has seen several generations grow up and return to the library with their children and grandchildren.

1933—In the Grip of the Depression: The Community Stands By Its Library

It was 1933, the country was in the grip of the Great Depression, and budgets—including the library's—were being crunched. To bolster the library's collections, the Hi-Y and Junior Hi-Y Clubs of Racine organized a campaign called Book Giving Week. They set quotas for books to be collected, and they worked with the public schools to meet them.

In the library archives today, is a well-worn and tattered letter of announcement from H.U. Wood, Principal of Franklin School, about Book Giving Week, which was to be celebrated in May, 1933. "Dear Parents" it said. "Did you know that your library in Racine...circulated almost one million books (984,000) in 1932?...Your library has rendered a great service to all Racine in these times of economic depression. We appeal to you now to stand by your library—Your help will cost nothing in dollars and cents, but will mean much to your library." Principal Wood asked that useable, old books no longer needed be given to the library, and, offering his support of Book Giving Week, Mayor William J. Swoboda proclaimed, "A book in the library is worth ten in the attic," and books were brought in by the armload. A quota of 5,500 books set in 1933, swelled to over 10,000.

1942—Library Starts Non-print Collections

In 1942, money from the Lee Fund was used to purchase phonograph records, the library's first nonprint collection.

In 1946, with the acquisition of 54 films purchased with \$1,500 from the Lee Fund, the library began a 16mm film rental service. The library used Lee funds in 1965 to add 8mm silent films to its holdings, and again in 1976, to add Super 8 sound films. With a gift of \$5,000 from the Optimist Club, the library began purchasing videocassettes in 1979. In the 1980's, as demand waned, the library discontinued the 8mm and Super 8 films. Today, although 16mm films are still used by local schools, they cannot compete with the popularity of videocassettes. As a result, the library is gradually phasing out the 16mm film collection.

In 1969, framed art prints were added to the library materials collection, still another service funded by the Emily A. Lee Fund.

Today, the nonprint collections are part of the library's materials budget, and they include music cassettes, compact discs, books-on-cassette, videotapes, and educational toys and games.

1945—Library Pioneers Wisconsin's First Great Books Discussion Group

Racine used Lee funds to begin its Adult Great Books Discussion Group, pioneering the first Great Books program in a public library in Wisconsin. City Librarian Frederick Wezeman wrote in June, 1947: "The Racine Public Library was the first public library in the state of Wisconsin to sponsor, in cooperation with the University of Chicago, a Great Books Discussion Group. This fall [1947] marks our third year of participation in the Great Books Project..."

1948—Bookmobile Takes to the Road

In 1948, the library started bookmobile service by converting an old school bus to hold about 2,000 books to transport to four weekly stops outside the city limits, a service intended primarily for county residents. The library replaced this small unit in 1953 with a 27-foot long bus-type bookmobile especially designed to serve as a traveling library. This unit was purchased for \$13,000 with funds from the Julia A. Schnetz Memorial Fund. Self-contained with a cab and engine, and an independent lighting and heating system, the new bookmobile had a capacity of at least 3,000 books. In 1968, the city purchased a new tractor-trailer unit to replace the blue bookmobile. This unit was replaced, in turn, in 1991 by a bookmobile purchased with a \$100,000 donation from Veronica Regas.

In 1955, the city had already added to its "library service on wheels" with the purchase of a mobile library—a trailer which had shelf space for 5,000 volumes. This trailer unit was set up on an 8-hours-a-day, six-days-a-week schedule at various locations in the city. In 1970, after 15 years of hard service, and plagued with mechanical problems, this mobile unit was replaced by a 40-foot vehicle painted Omaha orange. This new mobile library, dubbed "Big Orange," was a separate and distinct unit from the bookmobile, known as "Big Blue," and had shelf space for 5,000 books. The \$26,000 cost was again funded by the Julia A. Schnetz Memorial Fund. "Big Orange," which was eventually repainted and called "Big Red," was retired in 1993.

In addition to books, the bookmobile now circulates magazines, puzzles, book/cassette sets, audio tapes and compact discs for children; and magazines, music tapes, compact discs, and books on cassette for adults. Books, however, still comprise the majority of items.

The Library's first bookmobile was a converted school bus-1948



1950—Wisconsin's First Formal System for Transmitting Interlibrary Loan Requests

A teletype system, known as Racmil, was installed in 1950 to transmit requests to the Milwaukee Public Library to borrow materials not owned by the Racine Public Library. Although the library had been borrowing materials from other libraries on an informal basis, this was the first formal system in Wisconsin for transmitting interlibrary loan requests on a regular schedule. Today, we use computers to transmit interlibrary loan requests to libraries throughout Wisconsin, and often, to libraries in other states. The library's annual reports for 1925 and 1945 mention that we borrowed 91 books and 251 books, respectively. In 1996, we borrowed 2,104 items for Racine Public Library patrons, and lent 6,232 items to other libraries.

1956—First Public Funding of Library Building in Racine

The growth of its services, the increase in its use by citizens, and the library's attendant problems with its outmoded facility and outgrown space lead to the city council's approval of the construction of a new central library building. Located at the southeast corner of Seventh and Lake, the building would be paid for with funds from the Library Building Trust Fund, which the council had started in 1949, plus the proceeds from 10-year promissory notes. This would be the first library building in Racine paid for solely with public funds.

1958—Operation Library: Citizens Move Their (Library) Tales

Once the new library was completed, books needed to be moved from the old library in the Carnegie building, which had served the public since 1904. The community rose to the occasion and over 2,000 volunteers transferred 75,000 books from the old building to the new one, just one block east, on a pleasant day in May, 1958.

The volunteers, organized by the Racine Junior Chamber of Commerce and its auxiliary, carried stacks of books and numbered cards to keep the volumes in proper order. As the volunteers reached the new building, library staff called out numbers, and the books were swiftly reshelved. The community volunteers saved the library the cost of moving, estimated at about \$12,000, and the building opened without a hitch on May 18, 1958.

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1978—Library Switches to Computer Cataloging,

The library joined a national computer network for sharing cataloging information, known as OCLC (Ohio Cataloging Library Center). Using terminals linked to the OCLC computer in Ohio, the Technical Services staff could catalog library materials more quickly, and no longer had to type catalog cards, which were now produced by the computer and shipped to the library. Membership in OCLC also provided the means to create a computer database of the library's collections, which was later used in the library's automated cataloging and circulation system.

1979—Friends of the Library Group Forms

Federal funding waned during the 1970's, and mirroring a national trend, the Racine Public Library organized a Friends group. The purpose of the Friends was to support the library by lobbying on the library's behalf and by raising funds to provide additional financial support for library programs and materials. In 1979, the Friends of the Racine Public Library held its first membership recruitment meeting, and presented its first public event, a "Meet the Authors" program, which brought fifty authors to the library.

As budgets continued to tighten during the 1980's, interagency cooperation began to flourish. The library cooperated with local literacy efforts in the community, and with the Racine County Department of Human Services, the City of Racine Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Services, and others.

1985—Library's First Use of Remote Databases for Reference Service

In 1985, the reference staff began using remote computerized databases to find information when the library first subscribed to a service called Dialog.

1988—Library Building Expansion Campaign Begins

From 1988 through 1990, the library conducted a building expansion fund-raising campaign. A committee of community volunteers and library staff raised almost \$600,000 over the three year period, \$500,000 of which was used for library furnishings, and a remaining \$100,000 was invested by the library in a trust fund, earmarked for perpetual maintenance of furnishings and replacement as necessary.

1989—City Approves Library Expansion and Renovation Plan

The city approved plans for the expansion and renovation of the central library building.

1990—Library Begins Computerized Circulation

The library expanded its use of technology by installing a computerized cataloging and circulation system. Initially, there were only a few public access terminals due to space limitations, and the card catalog was retained. In 1991, when the building expansion was completed, the library was able to provide a sufficient number of terminals, and it removed the card catalog. The library had arrived in the computer age.

Today, the computer system includes a magazine index, a dictionary, a reverse dictionary, best-seller and other book lists, and information about new items that are on order. The system also includes TeleCirc, a feature which allows registered borrowers to communicate directly with the computer about circulation matters, such as items checked out, fines, overdues, and holds.

1991—Library Dedicates Newly Expanded and Renovated Building

The library dedicated its newly expanded and renovated building in August, 1991. Construction costs for this 62,500 square foot building were \$4,463,000. All library furnishings were purchased through the generosity of private citizens and businesses who contributed to the Library Expansion Fund. The present library's spacious, light-filled interior is noted for its sweeping lake views. The wide, curving expanses of glass provide a spacious, light-filled interior that seems to merge the blue of lake and sky—an environment suitable for both serious study and pleasure reading.

1996—Cruising the Information Superhighway: Internet Becomes a Reference Tool

In 1996, the reference librarians began using the Internet to locate answers to reference questions, and, this year, as the Racine Public Library moves into its second century of service, the library staff is making plans to provide public access to the Internet.

1998 & Beyond—Looking to the Future

In reviewing the events that have taken place over the last 100 years, one may wonder just what has sustained the Racine Public Library and its service for such a long time. Consider the fact that the library's function is essentially to disseminate records of human intellectual effort, such as books. Consider also the fact that the citizens of Racine established the Racine Public Library, and supported it for 100 years in spite of often difficult times in this area. One must conclude that Racine citizens valued the record of intellectual achievement, and further, that they believed in the benefit of providing an opportunity for all citizens to use such records. The library's history also shows the professional expertise of the staff of the Racine Public Library in meeting this expectation. We believe it is this combination of public faith and professional response that has sustained the Racine Public Library's service for 100 years.

Although many things have changed at the library over the last 100 years, the changes have affected primarily the means of delivering service, but have not resulted in a change in the public's perception of the value of the library to the community. Electronic access to information is currently changing the way library service is delivered. We can only speculate on what new technological developments we may implement some day to provide new and better library services. A key point of concern at present is the extent to which the rapidly-expanding commercialization of technological resources may limit public access to information. We believe that to ensure an enlightened, democratic society, such limitations must be overcome by a united effort on the part of the general public and library professionals.

As we celebrate the Racine Public Library's first 100 years of service, then, we celebrate the long-standing partnership between the community and its public library—a partnership that will continue to enhance the quality of life in Racine for a long time to come.