

The Allen County Public Library Fort Wayne, Indiana

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The idea of a public library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, was conceived by a former Michigan journalist and his allies in the late 1870s, brought to fruition through the work of club women in the early 1890s, and born with a public meeting hosted by the mayor in City Hall council chambers on January 28, 1895. "What to Read. Our New Library Solves the Problem." proclaimed the headline on a story about the new library in the next day's Fort Wayne Journal.¹

"Someone has said, 'All things come to him who waits,'" Mr. D. N. Foster said in his speech to the crowd gathered in council chambers the evening of the celebration. The former Grand Rapids, Michigan resident explained how he had left Grand Rapids and its public library in 1877 and moved to Fort Wayne, not then, as he termed it, "an ideal American city."² In 1877, Fort Wayne not only had no public library, but no sewers, no water works, no paved streets, and only a volunteer fire department.

In the summer of 1880, Foster and other residents interested in the idea of a public library approached local attorney Col. R. S. Robertson for aid. Robertson, without pay, authored an act that empowered all cities and incorporated towns of Indiana to provide a free public library in connection with the local school system, and the authority to levy a tax of not more than three cents on each one hundred dollars worth of property to establish and maintain the facility. The bill passed on March 7, 1881.³

In Fort Wayne, where the bill was authored, no public library appeared for fourteen more years, although the board of school trustees asked the city council for a tax levy for a library that very first year - Spring of 1881. The city council, which was described in Foster's speech at the library opening celebration as "dominated by persons who were hostile to the enterprise and who at once set about finding some way to evade the law,"⁴ managed to do just that. The

council found what Foster termed a "loophole" in a late provision added to the library bill while it was before the legislature.

Evansville representatives at that time noted that their city was one of two in the state that already had a public library supported by taxation, and that it might prefer to follow its "old law," rather than adopt the policies set down by the proposed bill. The Evansville representatives suggested the following provision to Robertson's bill: "Provided: That in any city or incorporated town where there is already established a library open to all the people, no tax shall be levied for the purpose herein named."⁵

When Fort Wayne's board of school trustees requested a tax levy for the purpose of establishing a public library in 1881, the city attorney reported that the city already had "a library open to all our people," and the council denied the request. Foster, in his speech, described this "library" as "a back office and on the dust-covered shelves of our township trustee."⁶ It probably consisted of the remnants of one of the old township libraries established by law in 1852, 1854 and 1855 and allowed to become defunct.⁷

This precedent of denial by the city council was followed until July of 1893, when the Woman's Club League approached the common council with a petition signed by hundreds of taxpayers asking that a public library be established in Fort Wayne. This time the council agreed

and levied a tax of one and a half cents, which garnered \$3,261.11 for Fort Wayne's first public library.⁸

The library's initial, temporary home was a room in City Hall. Fort Wayne residents got their first glimpses of the small library of 3,606 volumes when it opened its doors at 10 a.m. on January 29, 1895 in the charge of Susan Hoffman, librarian. The sources of these books were as follows: 117 from the Woman's Club League, 800 from the Allen County Teachers Association, 1,028 from the school board from the library of the high school, 247 from private individuals, and 1,414 purchased specifically for the new library. Of the books from the high school library, a portion had been part of the collection of the Working Men's Institute Library operated earlier in the city.⁹

Public interest and library use were great immediately; 1,477 residents held library cards by July and 4,461 had used the reading room.¹⁰ Within the year, the board of school trustees chose to relocate it to larger quarters - the Sol D. Bayless property at the southwest corner of East Wayne and Clinton Streets.¹¹ Three years later, the library moved again, this time to a site it had purchased for \$14,000 at the corner of Wayne and Webster Streets.¹² It opened its doors to the public on October 20, 1898, and has been in the same location for the past ninety-three years.

Librarians and library assistants to the turn of the century included Hoffman, Clara Fowler, Jennie

Evans, Margaret M. Colerick, Nancy McLachlan and a Miss Sturgis. Helen Tracy Guild, hired in 1897, was the library's first cataloger. Fowler followed Hoffman as librarian, and Colerick was appointed librarian upon Fowler's death in 1898,¹³ a position she filled until 1934.

Andrew Carnegie's Gift

By the turn of the century, Fort Wayne's library had outgrown its building once again. The Woman's Club League, instrumental in establishing the library originally, again acted on behalf of the facility and, with the help of other interested citizens, requested the aid of national philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1901. Carnegie did not grant this first request.¹⁴ But upon a second request, he gave \$75,000, plus an additional gift of \$15,000, toward the construction of a new public library building in Fort Wayne.¹⁵

The library occupied temporary quarters in the old Elektron building on East Berry Street while the Carnegie library was being constructed. It was there in 1901 that the library's first specialized department - the Children's Department - began.

On January 7, 1904, the new Carnegie library building of buff-colored Indiana limestone at the corner of Wayne and Webster Streets was dedicated. It was open from January 8 to August 18, then closed for decorating work and reopened permanently on October 13.¹⁶

Specialization

As the library grew, specialization

within its collections developed. The Children's Department, already mentioned, was the facility's first specialized department. In 1912, the library opened the Business and Municipal Department,¹⁷ now known as the Business and Technology Department. As early as 1905, the library was collecting material relating to the history of Indiana and Allen County in particular, which later became the Indiana Collection,¹⁸ a complement to the nationally-acclaimed Historical Genealogy Department. The Historical Genealogy Department formally was established in 1961, but as early as 1935, librarian Rex M. Potterf said in an address before the Quest Club, "Genealogy and local history are favorite pursuits and the facilities (of the library) for such are good."¹⁹

The precursor of today's Art, Music and Audiovisual Department began during World War II as the Record Room, where patrons could borrow 78 rpm discs.²⁰ The Young Adults Department opened in 1952. Public access cable television was added to the library in 1981, with the advent of the Television Services Department. The reference desk became the Readers' Services Department in 1983.²¹

Projects and Experiments

Beginning early in its history, the Fort Wayne Public Library experimented with various services beyond the mere lending of books. These included renting books, open shelves for patron browsing and reference service.

In 1900, the library tried the

experiment of renting extra copies of popular fiction. Five works, *Richard Garvel*, *Janice Meredith*, *Gentleman From Indiana*, *To Have and To Hold*, and *The Light of Scarthey*, were rented a total of 586 times during a nine-month period and brought in monies slightly exceeding the initial cost of the books. To satisfy patrons' demands for the latest books, the library started a rental collection again in 1922. It contained fiction and non-fiction volumes that were duplicates of circulating books.

With the move to temporary quarters during the construction of the Carnegie building in 1901, the library initiated its open-shelf system, allowing patrons to choose books by browsing.

Early reference service practiced by librarians at the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County was mentioned in an undated pamphlet titled "Equal Book Privileges for The Farm Home and The City Home," probably published between 1920 and 1931. The pamphlet described countywide library services and included this paragraph: "Farm clubs, community clubs, literary societies and women's clubs may get the help they need for papers, debates and discussions by requesting material on their special subjects."²²

Librarians of this time period also provided at least some reader's advisory service, as evidenced by this passage from the same pamphlet: "Help will be given as to the best books on any subjects, and book lists will be furnished upon request."

Also: "Through the County Librarian, reading lists and experienced help on the best books on specified subjects may be secured. For this service, reading lists already compiled by the Main Library, revised frequently and kept on file, may be drawn upon. New subjects will be considered and a list of recommended books submitted upon request."²³

Another innovation was providing patrons with current newspapers from New York; Boston; Indianapolis; Springfield, IL; San Francisco; and St. Louis. These appeared in the reading room in the fall of 1901, when the library began subscriptions.

By 1902, citizens from Allen County who did not live within the Fort Wayne city limits were allowed library privileges if they paid a fee of \$1 or showed proof that they owned property in Fort Wayne.

Also in 1902, the library began a program of lending books to schools that were considered too far away for students to use the library conveniently. Either for better service to school language classes or because of Fort Wayne's strong German heritage (or perhaps both), 150 German language books appeared on the shelves of the public library in 1902. Before this time the library had circulated only English language books. French language books were added to the collection in 1913 at the request of local French classes.

Interlibrary loan within the Fort Wayne and Allen County system began in the 1920s after the advent of county library service. County

residents had "the privilege of borrowing books of unusual interest or those on special subjects from the large resources of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County." Any circulating volume in its collection was available to be borrowed and was delivered to the library or person requesting it.²⁴

County and Extension Services

Until 1920, the Fort Wayne Public Library's services were free only to residents of the city or those who owned property within the city limits. But in that year, a petition was circulated asking for county library service, a tax was levied, and the Fort Wayne Public Library became the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County.²⁵ The Allen County Department was formed to meet the needs of residents outside the city limits. A pamphlet published shortly after the advent of county library service described the services of the Allen County Department, including library branches and deposits; reading and reference aids; interlibrary loan; and service to school libraries.²⁶

Years before the advent of countywide library service, the idea of reaching out to patrons who were not convenient to the library's downtown location had blossomed. Wayne Knitting Mills, a local factory, was the recipient of the first extension project of the public library in Fort Wayne. A small collection of books was placed at the mills in 1909. In 1916, the library's Extension Department became official and began placing selections

of books in factories, fire departments, and other locations. Hospital outreach service began in 1924 at Saint Joseph Hospital.

Schools also began to reap the rewards of the Extension Department with the establishment of the first public library high school branch at Central High School in 1917. A second high school branch opened at Southside High School in 1922. Northside High School's branch opened in 1927. With the expansion to county service in 1920, several of the rural high schools received library book "deposit stations." Jurisdiction of the high school branch libraries returned to the schools in 1930.

Branch libraries made their debut in 1912 with the opening of the Southside branch (now Shawnee) on South Calhoun Street. The Northside branch (now Little Turtle) opened at Wells and Sixth Streets in 1919. Since the change in 1920 from a city to a countywide focus, it has been a challenge for the public library in Fort Wayne to bring its services and materials within reach of patrons, not just in the city, but in all areas of Indiana's largest county. The library opened branches in Hometown, Monroeville and New Haven in 1921 in an effort to meet this goal. The Harlan branch followed in January of 1922, and the Pontiac branch library was established later the same year.

In November of 1926, the Richardville branch opened on South Broadway, and the Tecumseh branch opened on State Boulevard in Janu-

ary of 1927. The Monroeville branch library opened in 1928. One source also mentions a "Maumee" branch but gives no details or dates. The library established a reading room with circulating books in the nearby town of Arcola in late 1929, as well as other "deposit stations" across the county. The year 1929 also saw the advent of the public library's bookmobile in Fort Wayne, then referred to as a "book-wagon." It was one of the first bookmobiles in the nation. In 1930, book-wagon circulation totaled more than 17,000 items.

By 1931, the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County had a main library, five city branches, eighty-seven city deposit stations, four county branches, three reading rooms and 111 county deposit stations, as well as a book-wagon.²⁷

"Library centers" were located at Wilder's General Store in Aboite, More's General Store in Arcola, G.S. Myer's home in Cedarville, Grabner's General Store in Edgerton, the post office in Grabill, Moore's Filling Station in Hall's Corners, Barkley's Lumber Yard in Hoagland, Warner's General Store in Leo, D.L. Small's home in Maples, Linker's Filling Station in St. Joe, Townsend's General Store in Tillman, Farmer's Equity Exchange in Wallen, Noble's Grocery Store in Waynedale, opposite Village Hall in Woodburn, the post office in Yoder, and Knight's General Store in Zanesville.²⁸

1930s-1950s

The period of growth and expan-

sion in the 1920s was followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Allen County's library suffered through the Depression with increased business from the unemployed but with a budget barely large enough to remain solvent. The local newspaper described the hard conditions:

Valuable staff members were discharged, only a few books were purchased, rebinding was practically discontinued, points of contact with the public were eliminated or reduced in operation and the book stock (was) almost worn out by the hordes of unemployed who came to the library since they no longer had money to spend on amusements and entertainment.²⁹

Librarian Colerick died in 1934, and Rex M. Potterf took charge of the library in January of 1935. With his guidance, the facility was reorganized with a new approach that took into account the suffering economy.³⁰ Gradually the library, like the rest of the country, fought its way back. The Works Progress Administration aided in this process by making the repair of the main library and the branches one of its projects.

The library that suffered almost "an almost mortal blow"³¹ during the Depression, began to thrive again during the 1940s and 1950s. Two new bookmobiles with some sixty-six stops began rolling on Fort

Wayne streets in 1949 and 1951, again reaching toward formerly distant patrons.³²

1960s-1990s

By the early-1960s, when it was apparent that the facility had outgrown its Carnegie building, Fort Wayne's population - in effect the public library's "public" - had quadrupled.³³

In 1952, 56,204 registered patrons had borrowed 1,352,307 books and 23,707 phonograph records, and by 1962, 86,122 registered patrons borrowed 2,446,230 books and 32,153 phonograph records, an increase of more than half over 1952 figures.³⁴

Books and other materials were stored in 14 separate downtown locations because of a lack of space. Seven bookmobiles covered Allen County and made 250 stops per week. The system supported eight branch libraries. Seventy-two public and parochial schools were stocked with books and staffed by public library personnel.

"So we see that during the past ten years the faster pace of world affairs, business, technology and cultural writing, with the resultant flood of books from publishers, has brought to our Library a problem of containment. No place to put the books. The printed records is rapidly outgrowing our space for orderly arrangement. Books are of no value if not readily available," said a local newspaper advertisement, apparently a pre-bond issue plea, in 1962.³⁵

When firm plans were made for a new library building, collections

moved into cramped, temporary quarters in the Purdue Center. The Carnegie library was razed and the new modern-looking building of stark, white concrete went up. It was dedicated and opened in August of 1968.

An addition of 55,000 square feet that now houses the Historical Genealogy and Young Adults Departments was added to the building in 1981.³⁶

The year 1990 saw a great deal of renovation and growth for the facility now known as the Allen County Public Library. The main library and its branches were renovated, expanded, moved or, in one case, completely razed and rebuilt. In addition, two new branches were opened in the Dupont and Aboite areas.

ENDNOTES

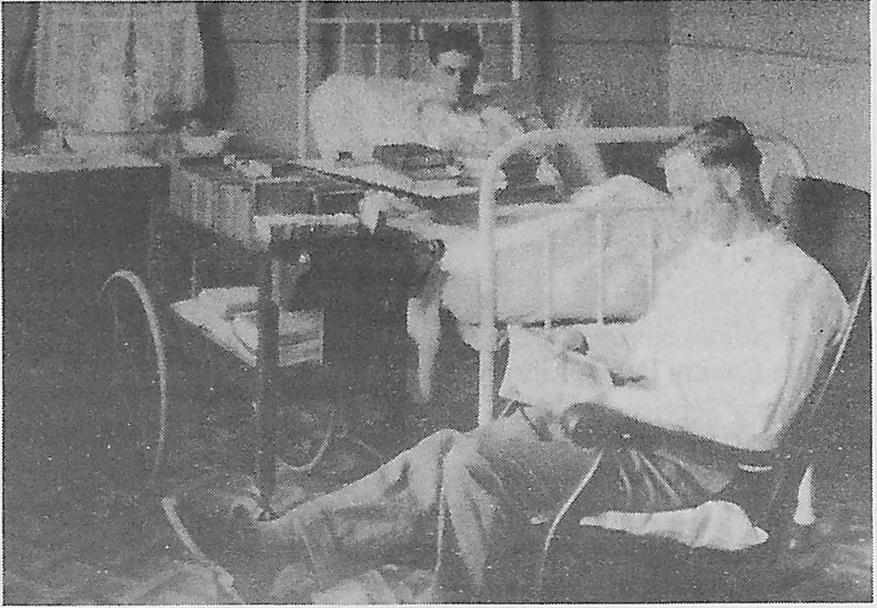
1. "What to Read," *Fort Wayne Journal*, 29 January 1895, p. 1.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
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7. Col. Robert S. Robertson, *History of the Maumes River Basin - Allen County, Indiana*, 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Bowen and Slocum, 1905), 2:334-335.

8. M.M. Colerick, "Fort Wayne Public Library," Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1930 (Typewritten), p. 1.
9. Robertson, 2:340.
10. Ibid.
11. Colerick, p. 1.
12. "Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County," Fort Wayne, 1928. (Bulletin), p. 3.
13. Colerick, pp. 1-2.
14. Robertson, 2:341.
15. Colerick, p. 3.
16. Ibid, pp. 3-4.
17. Ibid., p. 7.
18. Robertson, 2:343.
19. "Potterf Traces Growth of Library System in City," *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, 8 March 1935.
20. "Founding and Growth of Library Told," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, March 1958.
21. Allen County Public Library Readers' Services Staff, "Allen County Public Library Fascinating Facts and Figures," Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1990.
22. "Equal Book Privileges for The Farm Home and The City Home," undated pamphlet distributed by the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County that described the facility's library service to the community. Probable date: 1920-1931.
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26. "Equal Book Privileges."
27. Virginia C. Williams, "Many Additions Made to library Here Since 1907," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, 1931(?).
28. "Equal Book Privileges."
29. "Founding and Growth of Library Told."
30. Ibid.
31. "Founding and Growth of Library Told."
32. Ibid.
33. "Library Keeps Abreast of Quest for Learning," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, 30 December 1967.

34. Advertisement placed "as a service to the people of Allen County" by May Stone & Sand Co., 5 March 1963, Fort Wayne *Journal Gazette*, Fort Wayne, Indiana.
35. Ibid.
36. Allen County Public Library Readers' Services Staff.



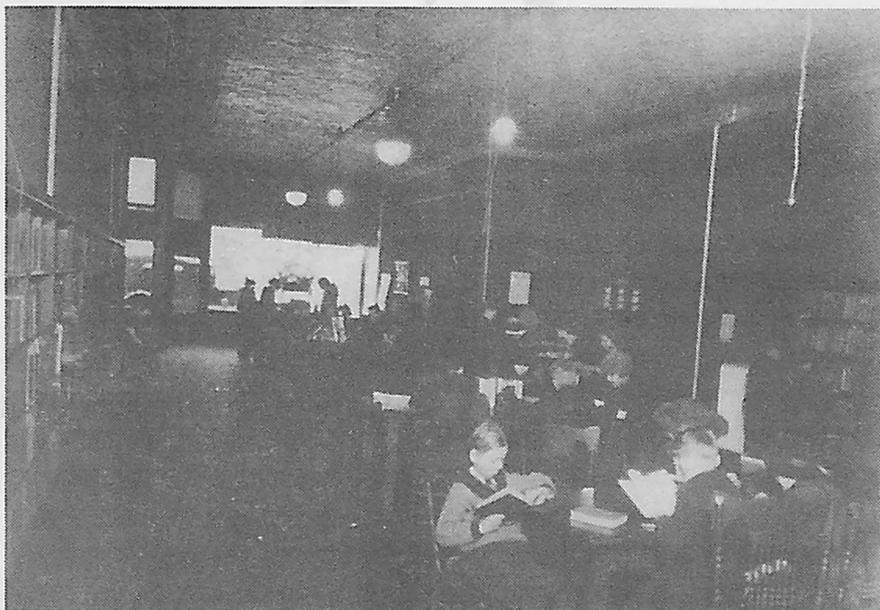
Fort Wayne Children's Department, 1911.
Photo courtesy of Allen County Public Library.



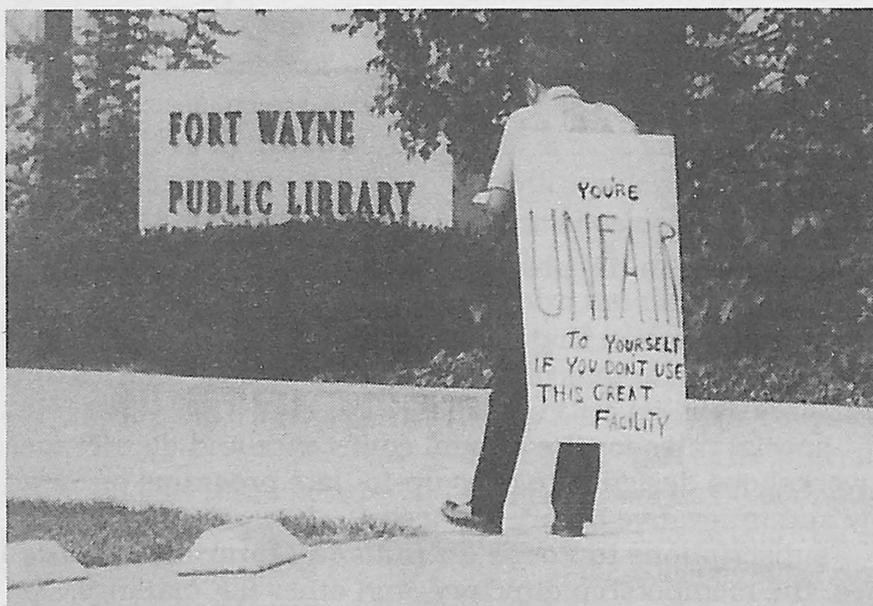
Fort Wayne Public Library Extension Department, Saint Joseph's Hospital, 1928. Photo courtesy of Allen County Public Library.



Fort Wayne Public Library Circulation Department, 1935. Photo courtesy of Allen County Public Library.



Fort Wayne Public Library Northside Branch, 1922.
Photo courtesy of Allen County Public Library.



An unknown man demonstrates in favor of the library, 1976.
Photo courtesy of *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*.