

## History of the Library in Urbandale

The history of the Urbandale Library was the subject of the Historical Society Meeting last October. Susan Clemmensen, audio-visual librarian, provided a visual presentation of photos taken through the years. Virginia Gee gave some factual background, and several retired staff members, who were present, shared their experiences.

Many community members have been involved with the establishment and growth of the library. The story begins with an article by Les Hamilton, editor of the Urbandale News.

He Wrote:

*“Back in the 50’s Ruth Daugherty wanted to know why Urbandale (incorporated as a community in 1917) didn’t have a library. Mitchellville is smaller than Urbandale and they have a library. Others joined the chorus and Mayor Pat Bible appointed a five member committee which included Madeline Kaloides and Iyleene Lemon. They were charged with exploring possibilities and bringing recommendations. Then mayor, Walker Johnson, realized the need for office space for the growing city affairs, seized upon the proposal to combine city hall and a library. There were discussions held, twice there was a float in the July 4<sup>th</sup> parade, petitions were passed and leaflets dropped door-to-door calling for a bond election to authorize the city to sell \$60,000 in bonds for the purpose of building a combined city hall and library.”*

In 1960 the election was held. Marian Chase was among the election judges who counted the ballots at the Legion Hall for that election. Some 532 citizens voted: 314 – Yes, 209 – No, and 9 spoiled ballots. The group left the hall believing the 60% majority had not been reached. But the next day, a ruling from Polk County stated that the spoiled ballots did not count against the number voting – 60% would be 313.8. The tally showed 314 voted Yes, so the city could

proceed with a building at 3317 70<sup>th</sup>. A great example of how important each vote can be!

In February 1961 a Library Board was appointed and held their first meeting. Chairman was Les Hamilton, and other members were Karl Urban, Margaret Avaux, Don Murphy, Helen Johnson, Ruth Daugherty, and Iyleene Lemon. (Karl and his wife Maytie were longtime Urbandale residents, and owned the property at 4010 70<sup>th</sup> Street which is now known as the Olmsted-Urban House.

In June Joan LePard, an Urbandale resident, was hired as librarian to work 23 hours a week for \$3,000 annual salary. Her assistant was June Johnson. Plans were made for the official opening of the library in the lower level of the new city building. Volunteers started gathering books. Local organizations such as Urbandale Women’s Club, Karen Acres Women’s Club, American Legion, Legion Auxiliary, Lions Club, Community Church Women, Garden Club, Chamber of Commerce, and PTA donated money for furnishings, books and equipment.

Karl Urban headed the purchasing and he and Les Hamilton installed shelves as they arrived. By the opening there were 1,728 books on the four sections of shelves ready for reference or check out. As the collection grew, there were 100 biographies, 450 children’s books, 975 fiction, 75 mysteries and 400 non-fiction and reference items. Assistants hired were Janet Lawson, Mae Nelson, and Betty Lynch. Hours were Monday 2-7p.m., Tuesday-Friday 2-9 p.m. and Saturday 10-5p.m.

The State Library furnished \$400 worth of reference books. The board voted to buy a used typewriter for \$17.50 and authorized \$2,500 to be spent on books {average book cost was under \$3.00}. An early purchase was a check-out machine that notched the card while imprinting the card number of the borrower.

Due dates were hand stamped on a slip in the front of the book.

The public responded with enthusiasm to their new library! Circulation in April 1962 was over 3,200 check-outs.

Through the years there were changes in library assistants. Some mentioned were Julia Biddle, Sheryl Gelder, Lucille Gordon and Mary DeVries. An important addition to the staff in 1965 was Hazel Demirjean, who went on to serve as cataloger for 26 years.

Circulation continued to grow, and with a boost from the popular children's summer reading program, the circulation in June 1965 was 7,400.

In March 1966, the position of librarian was made full-time with a salary of \$6,000. A new Gaylord check-out machine was added in 1968.

Through the years, the Library Board members took an active role in the direction of the library, with several of the first members staying on the board. Mr. Hamilton, Mrs. Lemon, and Mr. Urban each served 10-12 years.

A book buying guide passed by these early board members included:

1. Rely on the librarian's judgment
2. Note reader acceptance/outrage
3. Use taste—buy no filth deliberately
4. Buy a broad range of interests
5. Get durable books
6. Stay within the budget

As the collections grew there was a suggestion for the need for more space. Acting Superintendent of Schools, Dick Boyer, proposed the library be moved into the expanding high school along with the school library. When it became clear that the library was to be on the second floor and that over a third of the library patrons did not favor this change the board voted to remain separate.

Another proposal was to purchase land at 70<sup>th</sup> and Roseland across from City Hall with a proposed bond issue of \$185,000. Planning and Zoning approved the building but not the site; so the plan was put on hold. Several

other sites and proposals were suggested, but the City Council did not take action. Mayor Brick questioned whether a bond issue could pass, because of economic conditions and citizen concern over taxes. A defeat of the bond issue would jeopardize the entire city complex that was part of the long-range plans.

The existing library had approximately 1,400 square feet and by national standards another 5,000 square feet was needed to serve Urbandale's growing population. As a temporary solution, in April 1972 the library was moved with the help of volunteers to rental space in the Phipps Building at 3821 71<sup>st</sup> St. With 6,000 square feet at their disposal, the library staff was able to increase both service to patrons and the size of the collection. A traveling collection of 16mm films, art prints, and music cassette tapes was added. After 12 years of service, Karl Urban resigned from the board in September 1973.

In May 1974 a \$350,000 bond issue was passed with a 71% margin to construct a new building at 7305 Aurora Ave. on property conveyed to the city by the Urbandale School District. A Federal grant of \$100,000 was awarded to be used for additional construction costs.

Sara Pearson was hired in 1974 to coordinate the library's development. She now had a staff of eight. The four full time employees were Hazel Demirjean, Susan Clemmensen, Verda Simon and Janie Bell.

In April 1976 the new library was opened with 12,000 square feet and 32,000 books on the shelves. Among the services now offered were Regional Library privileges, meeting and conference rooms, a typewriter and adding machine for public use, programs and speakers for adults and children and increased space for leisure reading and studying. The collection included boxed games, sewing patterns and more films, cassettes and records. Jane Smith had been hired as an audio-visual librarian.

In 1987 the Urbandale Public Library Foundation was formed to be supported by

patron and corporate donations. Money could help the Library buy a computer system to replace the manual process for checking books in and out, and assist in the long-range planning for the library. The library's budget in 1985-86 was \$291,000.

By 1990 Director Pearson supervised 25 library employees and had many regular volunteers. Over 300,000 articles were checked out in a year. The collection included 75,000 books plus periodicals, cake pans, video cassettes, compact discs, records, art prints, and puppets. Hazel processed up to 500 books a month on the computer before they could be readied for check-out.

To meet changing needs, in 1991 after about 15 years, the building was remodeled to accommodate the growing collection. A new computerized circulation system was put in place to include patron check-outs and record keeping.

Urbandale continued to grow, and the library became part of the city's long range plan for development. In September 1998 Urbandale's citizens again showed support for their library by passing a bond issue with a 76% margin to construct a new building at 86<sup>th</sup> and Douglas. Part of the success was due to the project's plans to develop the building on Aurora Avenue into a Senior Center. The Library Foundation raised almost one million dollars to be used in construction for the new library. Materials were organized and transported and in July 2000 the 56,000 square foot building opened.

After 35 years as Library Director, Sara Pearson retired in 2009 and Katherine Manion was selected as the new director.

This July a celebration was held to recognize the past 10 years of the library with its expanded facilities at the 86<sup>th</sup> Street site. Statistics show tremendous growth. Circulation rose from 361,698 in 2000 to 644,028 in 2010, with a collection of a variety of materials numbering almost 160,000. Gate count of the number of persons entering the library almost tripled and the number of library card holders increased from 27,404 to

44,518 representing patrons throughout Polk County. Staff went from 23 to 41, and the number of volunteers also increased. A sign of increased demands for technology, the number of computers used by staff and patrons went from 5 in 2000 to 39 in 2010.

From the simple beginnings, Urbandale citizens continue to show pride in the way the library has expanded, and feel the staff, the materials, and services are the best in the area.

\*\* Information compiled by Virginia Gee with the help of Susan Clemmensen — 2010