

The Long History of the Cranbrook Public Library.

By Mike Selby, Information Services Librarian, Cranbrook Public Library

There was no snow that day, but it was cold; the temperature was barely above zero. The group waited until nightfall, agreeing to meet shortly after 8 pm. There was only twelve of them, but that was all that was needed. Surprisingly, there was no doubt. Each one had a steely-eyed confidence. As much as they loved the place they lived in, they were about to change it forever.

This was February 23, 1925.

They met in the YMCA building. It no longer exists, but when it did it was at the end of Baker Street, across Van Horne and next to the railway tracks.

The group met for one purpose only— “to consider the advisability of taking steps to obtain a public library for the city.”

And that is how it began. A winter meeting of like-minded individuals who, as much as they adored their hometown, desired to make its citizens “more intelligent, more tolerant, and more open-minded.” A public library in Cranbrook would help its users make the world a far better place. For this is what libraries do.

Minutes kept of the meeting are telling: “While it was deplored that the meeting was not more representative, it was felt the cause was a good one, had been successful in other places, and mainly required only the formation of a nucleus to grow to considerable dimensions through propaganda and publicity.”

There was no shillyshallying amongst this group. No wishful thinking. Each member suffered from an absolute self-belief in what they were doing. They didn't merely hope to make Cranbrook have a special future. They were forcing it into place. This was no easy thing. Dozens of public libraries had opened and closed across the province.

This bold group split into two smaller groups. One would canvas Cranbrook residents for membership applications and support. The other would look for

a suitable place to house the library. A chairman was appointed, and he was tasked with asking the Provincial Library Commission in Victoria for materials and financial assistance.

'The Library Twelve' met again one week later. The door-to-door canvassing resulted in 116 new library memberships. A handful of suitable buildings had been investigated and narrowed down. The YMCA had a large room available. Not only was it rent free, but—more importantly—was heated. The best place appeared to be a large vacant space at the Cranbrook Post Office. It was central, had heating, lights, and a janitor service. The Dominion (the name used at the time for our government) would charge the library \$5 per month for rent.

Although only seven days had gone by since their last meeting, the chairman had not only written to the Provincial Library Commission but had received a reply. Aid could be given only to associations, so that evening (March 9th, 1925) the Cranbrook Public Library Association was born.

They were not alone. The Cranbrook City Council set aside \$25 for the library. Cranbrook's Rotary, Elks, and Gyro service clubs also provided assistance. A resident donated use of his truck to collect books should anyone wish to donate them. The Cranbrook High School volunteered to do a second membership drive, and the local press published notices about the library free of charge.

Meetings took place sporadically for the next two months. Tables, chairs, and bookshelves were either purchased or built. Other items needed were "inkwells and pens," "paper clasps," and "table blotter pads."

Books, magazines, and newspapers began to pour in; some purchased, some donated, some loaned from other libraries. As today, the shelves were soon overflowing, so a few tables were exchanged for more bookshelves.

Almost as an afterthought, one of those irritating troublemakers wondered if a librarian should be hired at some point. An ad was quickly placed in both Cranbrook papers, offering a salary of \$10 per month. Numerous applications were received, most asking if the salary could be raised between \$20 and \$30 monthly.

On July 4th, 1925, the Cranbrook Public Library opened its doors to the public.

Cranbrook Public Library was initially open only on specific afternoons and evenings of the week. Mrs. A. S. Rumsay was Cranbrook's first Public Librarian, hired after answering an add offering a salary of \$10 a week (she had it bumped up to a healthy \$15.) The small but growing collection offered the citizens of Cranbrook a good selection of fiction, non-fiction, biographies, and local newspapers. While magazine subscriptions did not really take off properly until the 1940s, the library did manage to subscribe to 'National Geographic' and 'Popular Mechanics' (an amazingly perceptive choice; the library still subscribes to these).

As the 1930s rolled around so did the Great Depression, causing everyone to tighten their purse strings. In April of 1932 the Cranbrook City Council regretfully informed the library that they could only afford to give \$180 of their \$300 annual grant. Mrs. Rumsay, who had recently been giving a long overdue raise, suggested her salary be cut to make up for the shortage. This way there would be no interruption in library services. The city agreed, and Rumsay was back to \$15.

To help out during this time, the Cranbrook YMCA, run by the Canadian Pacific Railway, donated all their books from their reading room to the library.

1935 was greeted by letter from the Provincial Secretary, urging all public libraries to dispense with paid librarians altogether, and replace them with volunteers. Back in reality, the board members discussed finances, the need for more shelving, and urged each other engage in "more serious reading."

The board met again in October, this time to discuss a book. A patron had asked the library board to review the novel 'And Quiet Flows the Don' by Mikhail Sholokhov. A dense epic about Cossacks living along the Don river, the concerned patron thought it to be "unfit" for Cranbrook readers. A board member had read it cover to cover, and also found it "unfit." It was then voted not to acquire this title. It is with deep regret that no one recorded just what

exactly was so “unfit” about it. Not only is ‘And Quiet Flows the Don’ one of the most significant works of Russian literature to come out of the 20th century, but Sholokhov was awarded the Nobel Prize for it.

At least this was handled appropriately. Not so with a decade later, when a patron—incensed at seeing the library had a copy of John Steinbeck’s ‘Of Mice and Men’—took it upon themselves to immediately destroy it. While not alone in his opinion—Steinbeck’s masterpiece is one of the most challenged books of all time—this poor soul had to face a very unhappy librarian and her board members.

More shelved were built under windows and over radiators, but as the 1950s approached, the Cranbrook Public Library clearly needed more space.

It was becoming clear that this location was no longer suitable for the growing population of Cranbrook. Not only had tables been removed or reduced (one was actually sawed in half), but shelves had been built under, over and around windows, radiators, and even other shelves. By 1952 footstools were needed to access a significant portion of the Library’s holdings. Also, by this year there were 712 members, borrowing more than 11,000 books annually.

Serious discussions about finding a more suitable location began that year, with the Cranbrook Rotary Club characteristically offering assistance at all levels. While they began to draw plans and consult builders in addition to their fundraising activities, the library continued to operate as usual.

The early 1950s also saw the introduction of the Dewey Decimal Classification, which greatly organized the collection for easier access; helping readers find materials much quicker and make more effective use of library resources (albeit a nightmare to all elementary school students, forced to learn it under duress).

The Library also maintained a small but growing selection of children’s books, which was no easy thing. Unlike today, juvenile books had to be purchased from the H.R. Hunting Company in Springfield, Massachusetts (Luckily, a kind-hearted customs broker always waived the duties the library owed on book purchases). To complicate matters further, there was simply no room

for children's books, so the entire collection was kept at Central School, a difficult situation at best.

By the mid-1950s, overdue books were getting out of hand, so various strategies were implemented to deal with these book-borrowing scofflaws. Postcards were mailed out to patrons to remind them to return their books within seven days or be charged the book's full price (this was far gentler than the 1960s, when the library was able to have a phone installed. Then the holder of an overdue book would receive a stern conference-call from an extremely displeased Library Board, who offered to come to the person's house to collect the overdue items. Yikes!)

1957 saw the Library extend its hours of operation: it was now open every afternoon from 3 to 5 pm, and 2:30 to 9:30pm Tuesdays and Saturdays. There was a strict three-book limit, which was further limited by insisting one of the books be nonfiction. If one wished to just check out fiction, only two books were permitted. Kids were limited to only one book—and only if they were accompanied by an adult.

A horrifying incident took place on January 15th, 1958, causing an emergency meeting of the Library Board. Earlier that day, a member of the library staff caught a grade 6 student "reading a book from the adult section!" Fortunately, the Board took swift action, banning not only this miscreant, but all students in grade 6 or under from attempting to read above their station.

The Cranbrook Public Library greeted the 1960s in their new location at the Provincial Government Building.

There must have been some smiles that day. Some well-earned grins amongst the small yet celebratory crowd. A match was struck. A document was set alight. The people cheered.

Fire is the bane of libraries everywhere, but this one, set in the fall of 1975, was special. This one consumed a mortgage document, one the Cranbrook Public Library had just paid off. Besides being debt free, this year also marked

the 50th anniversary of Library. The year before, BC's Library Chairman had stated "it was one of the best libraries in the entire province."

This had been no easy thing. Since its inception in 1925, the Library mirrored the steady growth of Cranbrook itself. When its original site at the Old Post Office became unmanageable, it relocated to larger Provincial Government building in 1958.

Unfortunately, this site was too small almost immediately, and by 1962 the Library was seriously overcrowded. A new Library Building Project Committee was (once again) formed to investigate alternatives.

Meanwhile, the Library was now open 6 days a week from 1:30 to 6:00 pm, with the exception of Tuesdays and Saturdays when it stayed open until 9:30 pm. Talk of being open 7 days per week was discussed, but this would not occur for another 50 years. Much of the actual library work had to be done in the morning, as it was simply impossible to do much of anything when open.

Besides books and serial publications, the Library now began to collect films from the National Film Board of Canada. A projector was also available for loan, but one had to demonstrate a working knowledge of it before it could be checked out. The World Book Encyclopedia was now available for patrons, although someone walked off with volumes "A" and "B" in 1964. While overdue books are common and expected, theft of books another thing altogether. A series of the Harvard Classics and a copy of Chute's 'Shakespeare of London' had been checked out by someone unwilling to return them (they eventually did, although months had gone by).

This was nothing to a case in the early 70s, when a Library member blatantly refused to return a series of costly books they had borrowed and did so "in the rudest of terms." The Library was forced to take the member to small claims court, where the Judge ordered the person's wage to be garnished.

By 1966 the Library had 88, 282 items in circulation, with 1605 adult members and 3232 juvenile members. Just over 500 books were in use by the local schools, as were the Film Board movies. Teachers of all grades continued to bring their classes to the library, who were instructed in proper

library use techniques. Yet even without a class of 20 to 30 students, most days the Library was standing room only.

Unfortunately, Cranbrook's Mayor at the time appeared unsympathetic. His solution was to dissolve the Library altogether, and to let the public schools handle the city's reading material. No one else on the City Council agreed with this idea (a logistical nightmare at best), and the push for a new library building continued. On August 24th, 1970, a new mayor (ha ha) turned the first sod at Balment Park, future home of the Cranbrook Public Library.

June 19th, 1971, was the day the Library opened its doors to its very own building. A majestic totem pole was built to commemorate the site which had been a significant meeting place of our First Nation ancestors. Prime Minister Trudeau was scheduled to tour the Library on opening day (it remains unknown if he did—no one recorded whether he was there or not).

A brand-new building—what could go wrong? Almost immediately, the newly laid carpet began to wrinkle and curl. The outside lights worked haphazardly, and after the first light rain the windows leaked around the edges. After the first heavy rain, every car became stuck in the gravel—now mud—parking lot. That mud also ruined what was left of the wrinkled carpet, which really took a beating in 1973 when the Library became completely flooded. The flood was a combination of a leaky roof and city piping.

But all that is simply housekeeping. The new building brought an incredible increase in both adult and juvenile memberships. A Children's Library was created, as was a separate Reference section. Puppets also made their first appearance during the 70s. Children's Story-time became so popular it was soon overrun and had to be divided into separate times. The Canadian Nursing Association, Selkirk College, School District Five, the Cranbrook Archives, and the Cranbrook Play-school all occupied sections of the Library. Even the Cranbrook Boxing Club requested use of part of the Library to train in, but this was vetoed due to noise considerations.

After nearly 70 years of services the Library was forced to shut its doors in the fall of 1991. During this time, no child would be exposed to reading, no drop-out would be able to study for their GED, no student would be able to work on their school assignments, no diabetic had access to life-saving recipe books, no immigrant could explore ESL resources, no parent could obtain and fill out child-custody forms, no senior could learn about computers, no careers were explored, no retirement options were discovered, no new mothers could read about what to expect, no builders could consult provincial codes, no interest-groups could meet, and...well, this list is endless. But a literal padlock was placed on the building that for decades contributed to the cultural, economic, social, technological, and educational well-being of Cranbrook. Just how did any of this happen?

A cash-strapped province combined with indifferent city governments had somehow transformed public libraries from an “essential service” into a “soft service”—the equivalent of a jacuzzi at a city swimming pool. With budgets cut and cut again, Cranbrook’s Library had no choice. With deep regret and anguish, and a great deal of courage, the Library laid off its staff and closed down for what was easily the longest two weeks in 1991—saving the city 10,000 dollars.

This was just the beginning though. The Library continued to be underfunded, and the only viable way to keep the doors from shutting again was to introduce user fees—an action which ran against the ethics and values of both the Chief Librarian and the Library Board. Sadly, there was no other option left. (Part of the problem was the Library was classified as a provincial association, and not a municipal library, which muddied the funding waters greatly).

Cranbrook was not alone in this, and user fees also existed in public libraries throughout BC and Alberta. This issue was soon hashed out in every single newspaper in BC, with Cranbrook being the focal point (the town’s introduction of user fees continues to be mentioned in Library Science journals and textbooks).

Fortunately, the British Columbia Library Act was legislated into law on August 26th, 1994. Section 46 of the Act made it illegal for public libraries to charge for use of a library’s core services. This also meant that the province

had to make up for any financial deficit left by the removal of user fees. The Library could get back to business as usual.

Which included the introduction of the province's union catalogue on CD-ROM, a new type (and now obsolete) storage device, giving Cranbrook patrons access to just over 4 million titles available for interlibrary loan across the province.

Although the building itself still floods, the roof still leaks, and actual plants have begun to appear wall cracks, one of the biggest threats to the Library is the foul balls hit by Mount Baker High School students, which every now and results in a broken window.

In the spring of 1997 the city of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho challenges the Library to the Sister City Family Reading Challenge—a contest to see which city can read more in a month, with each city wearing pins and promoting the other city's economy. Those poor Americans misjudged Cranbrook's competitive acumen, not to mention our long winter reading habits.

Jeffrey M. Wallman's 1973 western 'Brand of the Damned' was unsuccessfully challenged, as was the children's book 'Sam & Lucy' by Harriet Ziefert. Both were thought to be too sexually explicit, but the Library Board voted to retain both items.

A concerned patron also challenged Jean De Brunhoff 'The Travels of Babar,' (an award-winning children's book) citing the elephant's interaction with cannibals. When the Library decided to retain the title, the same patron filed a second challenge, citing the book's racism. This patron also offered to voluntarily "cleanse" the Library of all children's books promoting racism.

Children's Books featuring same-sex parents caused a near-riot at a Surrey elementary school, creating a campaign known as Bigots Ban Books. This hit a note here at home, as the Library received numerous strongly-worded letters on both sides of this issues.

An August 3rd, 1999, the Library's website was not only up and running but won the StudyWeb Award for Educational Excellence. The head of the province's Library Trustees visits Cranbrook, finding the Library to be "a

million-dollar asset.” Writing an open letter to City Council, he stated “the community has a great deal to be proud of in its Library. While challenged for space the board and staff do an outstanding job providing the community with high quality library services.”

A new location for the Library was badly needed at the beginning of the 21st century. The growing user base of the Library had far outstripped the now crammed-quarters of the Balment Park location, which the Library had occupied since 1971. Besides lack of space, the building itself had become more and more decrepit. When a plant (affectionally known as ‘Herb’) grows out of the building’s walls, it is definitely time to move.

Yet it was clear, and had been for some time, that moving was the least of problems facing the Library. Funding for the Library continued to shrink, forcing it to now close on Sundays—one of its busiest days. The cause of the problem was an old one: the Library continued to be a provincial association, and not a municipal one. Becoming a municipal one should have been easy enough, but a succession of City Councils always balked at the idea. Since the mid 1980s, the City Council had a “disdain” of the Library, while the Library Board had a “real lack of trust” of the Council. This did not make for smooth negotiations.

After a special meeting in the summer of 2001, the Library’s board, staff, and numerous patrons formerly requested “that the city of Cranbrook assume the ownership and assets of the Cranbrook Public Library Association, and...establish the same as a Municipal Library under the provisions of the Library Act.”

Fortunately, City Council agreed, and The Cranbrook Public Library was granted municipal status on January 1st, 2002.

This paved the way for a new building referendum in November of 2002. Although “no” was the result, the votes were far too close to be ignored. A second referendum took place in 2005, and this time the vote was “yes.” It was the time for the Library to move once again, this time into the old East Kootenay Health Unit. The new Library opened its doors to the public in January of 2007.

One of the most horrifying and unthinkable events occurred in 2001, when, (it pains me to type this), the city of Coeur d'Alene beat Cranbrook in the Sister City Family Reading Challenge.

Even though the 'Harry Potter' series got a whole generation reading, a parent found it harmful and wished it to be removed from the Library and all Cranbrook schools.

A more troubling book challenge involved Arthur Butz's 'The Hoax of the Twentieth Century.' Published in 1976, this was the first book in English to deny the Holocaust. A Mount Baker student found it troubling that the Library had such a book, and requested it be removed. Still finding the book of the shelf, it appeared the student removed the book herself. She also tried to interlibrary loan copies from other BC libraries, with the probable intention of destroying those as well.

She certainly wasn't alone. This godawful and abhorrent book has been challenged before, and not just in Cranbrook. In the 90s, RCMP removed and shredded the book from the University of Calgary Library, and again at the Didsbury Public Library.

E-books, free Wi-Fi, online databases, tablets, Facebook pages, digital magazines, summer reading clubs, travel programs, technology help, homework help, full-time reference assistance, digital due date reminders, book clubs, knitting clubs, scrapbook weekends, movie nights, and much more, the Cranbrook Public Library continues to serve and grow with its city, honoring the commitment first made by a group of citizens back in 1925.