

Early History of the Evergreen Park Public Library

By Amie Martin, Head Librarian from 1944-1977

In 1940, when we moved to Evergreen Park, the nearest library facilities were at 111th and Hoyne and 62nd Place and Kedzie. Many of us didn't do much traveling in the city as we were so busy getting started in our homes out here.

I belonged to the Women's Club and we had a group of books over at the Evergreen Funeral Chapel, where we met for our club meetings during the winter season. I went about every two weeks and sat for an hour or two seeing if anybody wanted to come and get the books, but it wasn't very well known. The books had been loaned by one of the members, and they didn't really encourage outsiders.

In March of 1944, a group of people, including representatives from the Women's Club, the Methodist Church, and the Evergreen Park Public School P.T.A. got together with representatives from the Village Board and the School Board to talk about establishing a library. Central School went to eighth grade, but didn't have a school library at that time.

After meeting for several months, the group decided to have a Mardi Gras in the public school gymnasium.

All the organizations, some of the churches, the P.T.A. and the Women's Club got together and organized a program with such things as a fish pond and other games that the children could play, and sold hot dogs and other refreshments. We made about \$800.00 at that time which was used for supplies to establish the library.

The Village Board gave us a building at the alley line behind the village hall that had been built during the W.P.A. days, and then housed the fire equipment. They gave us a room and put shelves in for us. We spent the summer sorting books. We had a drive for gift books, many of which we could not use because they were in very poor condition, and were cast-offs, as gift books often are. We did start off through a gift of books from the Chicago Lawn Branch, which was then a depository for unused copies, extra copies, in this area of the Chicago Library branches.

We got in touch with the State Library, who sent one of their assistants out to see us, verified our need, and gave us a gift from the State Library. We had about 500 books to start the library, though very few children's books.

Miss Vaughn sent us to Witter's Book Store downtown in the Garland Building and gave us an amount of money to spend and stretch as far as we could. The owner, Robert Butcher, was very generous in giving us a lot of things that we could use and didn't charge us the full price.

We opened the library on September 7, 1944 in the space behind Village Hall. This space was also used by the police after 5 o'clock when the village hall closed, to answer telephones or police calls during the night.

We also had help in the fall of 1944. The young people's group of the Bethel Lutheran Church had put on a minstrel show, and they offered to do it again to benefit the library. Connie and Nick Angelo danced during the intermission because they were a dance team and they were very, very good.

We didn't have too large a circulation the first few months, but we were only open sixteen hours a week; Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2 to 5, Friday nights until 7, and Saturday from 1 to 5. Mrs. Constance Angelo joined me on staff in November and Mrs. Dorothy Gere in January, 1945.

We were paid 75 cents an hour and I usually paid about 35 cents to have our Bruce taken care of. Dorothy worked Tuesdays, Connie on Thursdays, and I worked Friday nights. We rotated Saturdays.

Our first library board was elected in April, 1945. William Laskey, representing the Methodist Church was President. Other members were Margaret Piper, representing the P.T.A.; Edward Roselle and Herbert Johnson (our first treasurer), representatives at large; Milton Wonder, from the Methodist Church; Ethel Long, from the northeast section; and myself representing the southwest section. When they asked me to carry on as librarian, I had to resign from the board.

I had gone to DePaul University at Greencastle, Indiana for my undergraduate work. When I finished in 1935, there weren't any teaching jobs available. While doing volunteer work at Presbyterian Hospital (in the patient's library), the librarian urged me to go to library school. I went to library school down at Illinois, graduating in 1938.

I was able to get a job on a multi-county W.P.A. project with twenty counties out of Rockford. Luckily, I had a car as I had to go to a number of towns. I wanted to do hospital library work and after taking the examination at the Veteran's Administration, I was assigned to Hines Hospital in Maywood. Later, they wanted to send me to Augusta, Maine. But I had gotten married in the meantime and we were buying a house in Evergreen Park, so I retired from the Veteran's Administration.

In addition to the Library Board being elected, a proposition was passed to establish a library with a tax rate of .15 mils which we stayed within for many years.

We didn't get any tax money until 1946 because it took us a year after the regular election to accumulate any tax money, but we managed to survive on donations.

I did all the cataloguing of books at home. They all came by parcel post to my house and my dining room table was always covered with books and other library materials.

We bought supplies from Gaylord Library Supplies, in New York, and they were shipped by freight. At that time, there was still a little shanty between 95th and Kedzie on the railroad, and the trains dropped off packages and other freight. My father went with me over to the building and got the supplies. We took them to the library to process the books for the shelves. Of course, some of the things I took home with me like catalogue cards and book pockets. I was always carrying books back and forth, or else supplies for months until we got organized. At that time, we still shellacked the books, which was one of the ways that you preserved the covers of books. But that went out of use after a while, and we began using the plastic covers that one sees on books nowadays. It preserved the dust jacket and you could see the pictures and read a little about the book on the dust jacket.

We were in that little building for ten years, outgrowing our space. In 1950, it was remodeled. The Village Board had let us hire a carpenter to remodel the building and give us more space. But it still wasn't enough. I got to the point where I wondered if we'd ever move.

In 1954 we moved 14,000 books to 95th and Homan. I don't know how we had ever managed to crowd all of them in the old building. We had eleven more running board feet on 95th Street, but it didn't last long.

The Village helped us move by using a very old piece of fire equipment, a kind of truck they were no longer using. Ozinga Brothers Cement and Coal yard offered the use of one of their regular trucks. They helped us get boxes, and we put books in the boxes, marked them and hoped to be able to find them when we got to 95th Street in regular order. I used our station wagon, that August 1954, and several others did offer the use of their cars.

It was a store building, with the owners living in an apartment on the second floor. We had our own heating system (much better than the village building) a private toilet, and access to the laundry. The only problem was that our landlord paid for the heat, so they didn't turn it on until we got there at noon. We added a Monday night hour, working from 12 noon to 5 p.m. closing from 5 to 7, and open again from 7 to 9 p.m.

In 1957 we began planning a new library to be built at 94th and Albany. After the architect and contractor were chosen, it took ten months to build the new library.

This time Mayflower was hired to do the moving to the new building. We put things in boxes, labeled them, but they just set them down any which way, not as we had organized them.

One of the first things we added to the library were magazines because we never had room, nor money, for magazines before. We also bought \$2,000.00 worth of books from Ritter Book Company. We had them on specials shelves and anybody that wanted to could pay for a book of their choice for the library, and we put a book plate in. Later we added films and pamphlets.

Later, when the library began to fill up and run out of space, we began to plan the addition, which was completed in 1976. On June 13th, 1976, we had a heavy rainstorm that flooded the basement. Fortunately, the carpeting hadn't been laid as yet. We had brought down a lot of children's books as a place to keep them for the time being. Practically all of our magazines and about 4,000 children's books were lost. It was a mess to go through and the insurance company wanted to know the exact price of everything.

When the addition was completed, the staff members, with the help of a few men and the son of one of the staff moved all of the books. We tried to move them in sequence so we could just put them on the new shelves directly from the old. We closed for two weeks and spent every single day moving books and all. This time there were about twenty or thirty thousand volumes to move.