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St. Pete Beach Public Library

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Florida Library History Project

St. Pete Beach Public Library

"Library to Celebrate 30th Anniversary This Month"

(Article by Community Correspondent Virginia Sturges from the Suncoast Sun of April 30, 1981)

The sheet of notebook paper is yellow with age. The entry reads: "January, 1951: We have on hand one double-tiered bookcase which Mr. Woolsey made for us. Club paid for the material. Also have dater and stamp pad to begin with, paid for by the Club, plus 350 books donated by Mr. Clyde Wilbur, Mr. Curtis Wilbur and their sister, Mrs. E.A. Considine."

The report was written 30 years ago by Dorothy Heath, a member of the St. Petersburg Beach Community Club, who had volunteers to help set up a library.

This was the modest beginning of what we know today as the St. Petersburg Beach Public Library. The beautiful \$200,000 facility will be holding a day-long open house on Wednesday, May 6, to celebrate its 30th birthday, with free coffee and doughnuts all afternoon and evening. Short award-winning films will also be shown throughout the day. Appropriately, the party will be held in the Dorothy Heath Conference Room.

There were only 30 members of the St. Petersburg Beach Community Club 30 years ago; the population of St. Petersburg Beach itself was only about 800, and excepting Pass-A-Grille, the little towns around it were not yet incorporated. The Club had been organized since the 1930's, and offered recreational services and performed civic duties. But the subject of a library had never come up. Not until that day when the Wilburs donated their 350 books.

The ladies pondered the problem. None of them had any library experience and there was no room in the little clubhouse for a library. But the challenge was there and they decided to tackle it.

"Have been to the Pinellas Park Library and watched how they check books in and out. Also to Mrs. Charles Haslam's," Mrs. Heath's report continues.

From Mrs. Haslam, who had set up the Pinellas Park Library in 1947, Mrs. Heath learned library procedures and the Dewey Decimal System. Another club member, Mrs. Goldie Schuster, donated the first \$10 to buy the necessary 3" X 5" file cards. The file box was a cardboard shoe box.

A group of volunteers spent afternoons in the club kitchen, working at the tables with brown wrapping paper, cutting and labeling it to show the book title and author to make the card pockets for the back of the books (sic). Helen Norberg, Eleanor MacKenzie and Alice Moran were Mrs. Heath's chief assistants. Later, Julie Reitberg was to become an important volunteer.

"Mrs. Ernest Stern has loaned us her typewriter which we use in the library and also for work at home which I do on index cards. She has asked me to be responsible for it," Mrs. Heath notes carefully.

In those days, the St. Petersburg Beach Community Clubhouse was a small building on Blind Pass Road and 73rd Avenue, where the present library now stands. It was in a corner of that room where the Long Key Library, named after the island where it was located, opened its doors to the public for the first time in May, 1951, with 450 books on two shelves. The additional 100 books were from enthusiastic donors. Fifteen members signed up that month. Dues were \$.25 a year; out-of-towners paid \$1 deposit which was returned to them when they left town.

To staff a library daily with a group of only 30 volunteers was not easy. Those dedicated workers at the beginning included Mrs. Heath, the Librarian, Eleanor MacKenzie, Melita Fieber, Helen and Betty Norberg, Kathryn Hance, Erma Goetz, Alice Moran and Catherine Meirs.

"Mrs. Schuster donated a sign to the library. Members working on books to be catalogued. Am doing work at home on index cards. Alice and Helen helping with same," Mrs. Heath notes in September, 1951. "Seventy-two members have joined now."

The number of books grew as more and more donations were received. One person donated \$5,000.

Beulah McCarthy started a Story Hour for the children on Saturdays; a former art and hobby teacher at the University of Maryland, she became known as "Miss Beulah" to the children. Mrs. Goldie Schuster bought and donated all the books that were used in the Story Hour.

Later, the Florida State Library Extension Service lent 200 adult and 200 children's books. The club continued to support the library, not only with their work but with funds for tables, chairs, magazine racks, shelves and a globe. The drapes hanging in the library today are a gift from the club, which still meets monthly, but now in the Upham Room of the Municipal Building.

The growth has never stopped: First, a little room added to the south end of the building in 1952 where the books were moved for the original shelves; another expansion in 1955 after municipal consolidation took place. At this time, the library was officially turned over to the City of St. Petersburg Beach, but then-Mayor Carlyle Manley requested the club to continue its supervision. Marge McFadden, the club's president, cut the ribbon on the new building. The number of books was now more than 4,000.

By 1964, there were 10,000 books; circulation was 60,000 for the year and membership totaled 1,100. Clearly, larger quarters were needed. The ladies again went into action.

Helen Weber organized the Friends of the Library, and fund raising began... eighteen hundred pancakes were sold at a flapjack jamboree. The First Gulf Beach Bank donated \$1,000 and gave the City a loan, enabling it to meet requirements to match federal funds.

Ground was broke on in October, 1968, and while construction was underway, the Library continued operations from a store on Corey Avenue; during that year, 79,000 books were circulated.

On July 7, 1969, the new St. Petersburg Beach Pubic Library, as we know it today, opened for the first time.

With the new library established, Dorothy Heath could at last retire with a clear conscience, knowing a job well done. William Barnett replaced her, and remains in charge today, with five assistants, Ruth White, who started as a volunteer in the early days, is still there and was recently honored with a Distinguished Service Award from the City.

The growth continues: today the library has 35,000 volumes and 4,600 members. Circulation last year was 140,000 books. National Geographic film programs are presented monthly, and Operation Outreach takes these films to nursing homes. There are summer reading programs for children, and vocational guidance for adults.

Was the new opening in 1969 as exciting as the first opening in 1951? "Goodness, no," says veteran volunteer Helen Norberg, "Remember, if we hadn't planted that little acorn in 1951, we wouldn't have this giant oak tree today. I felt children and older people had great need of a library. I said then and I say it again: "What have you done for the least of these My brethren, you have also done it for Me."

It is dedication like this that explains the success of the library. The public is urged to join them for the 30th birthday party on May 6.

UPDATE: Head Librarian William Barnett retired in June, 1994, and was immediately succeeded by St. Pete Beach native and former library patron Roberta Whipple (nee Lamb). The library was closed for five months---April through September---in 1995, for a renovation of all public areas of the building's interior. For more information on the refurbishment project and a description of how the library looks today, see the section called "St. Pete Beach's Best Kept Secret" under "If You're From Out-of-Town"...