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Northwest Regional Library System

Ann Robbins

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Florida Library History Project

Northwest Regional Library System

Bay County's first library was established in 1911 in Lynn Haven through the efforts of the A Woman's Literary Club. As interest in establishing a library in Panama City grew, editorials appeared in the *Panama City Pilot* newspapers and citizens wrote letters to the editor. On November 20, 1913, an article in the *Pilot* reported several reasons why every community should have a public library:

Public libraries are an essential part of a complete educational system.... Society is required to educate the man of forty just as much as the boy of five.... The library helps workers do their work.... The library furnishes rest, relief and recreation for tired workers.... The public library helps make intelligent citizens.... By its cooperative principle, the library makes one dollar do the work of many.

How well this writer understood the public library. The article continued:

Panama City could scarcely do a public act that would be as beneficial as starting a public library. The town shouldn't have a library that is simply a collection of books upon the shelves that are only now and then referred to. No library should be started without the adoption from the beginning of a perfect system, both as to the selection, care, and distribution of the books but as to the means by which the library shall accomplish the greatest good to the greatest number.

Citizens interested in forming a library met in January 1914 and formed an organization called The Panama City Library Association. It was several months later before the library was actually established.

Through the years to come, the Woman's Club played a major role in the development of the public library in Bay County. Though many people of the community tried to keep the library open, the library didn't have a place to call its

own. In fact, the library moved so many times that it was often referred to as The traveling library.

In 1939, Miss Bessie Norton, librarian of the high school, spearheaded an organization called Friends of the Bay County Free Public Library. Two WPA workers were assigned to the library of forty books, one table and one chair. All that was needed was a building to call its own. The citizens of the community rallied to the library cause and a partially finished building was located in Washington Park next to the Post Office on Jenks Avenue. Through great effort, money was raised, and on September 10, 1941 the building in Washington Park was dedicated as a library.

The library shared the building. We had two rooms and one bathroom with the Chamber of Commerce. Library books were checked out by hand stamp; bookshelves were so full that many returned books had to be stacked on top of the card catalog or the floor. As one library patron said: One visits the Bay County Public Library only if he is entirely free of claustrophobia. It was a great day when the Chamber of Commerce moved into a new building and the other two rooms and bathroom were available to the library.

By 1960, the library had almost doubled its services. We had a bookmobile and the McMullen Library in Lynn Haven became a part of the county system. In September 1960, the Bay County Free Public Library was incorporated as the Bay County Public Library Association, Inc. The Association contracted with the Bay County Board of Commissioners to provide library services to our citizens. In 1962, the library purchased a second bookmobile and the Association contracted with Washington County and formed the Northwest Regional Library System.

In 1962, the Bay County Public Library also was in the middle of a building fund campaign. The land and buildings in Washington Park were sold to the federal government and the library moved again to the Christo Dime Store building on Harrison Avenue. We were to be in the storefront for only a year, but, three years later, we were still there and growing. Gulf, Calhoun, and Walton Counties joined the library system.

In May 1967, the library building on the City Marina was completed and it was time to move again. With typical thrift, the library staff, a few volunteers and the Boy Scouts moved the bulk of 60,000 volumes into the new building. Library

Director Jane Patton reminded the staff: Although we (now) have a beautiful new building, library service and people are still more important.

As the Sixties gave way to the Seventies, Walton County withdrew from the System. In 1973 and 1974, Liberty and Holmes Counties joined the Northwest Regional Library System; we served six counties covering 3,946 square miles.

The end of the Seventies brought more changes to the library. Springfield Public Library opened. During the height of the gas shortage, the library decided to discontinue bookmobile library service. There were a lot of good memories of riding the highways and dirt roads on the bookmobile trail, but times were changing. A federally-funded program, Mail-a-Book Library Service, took the place of the bookmobiles until funds for that project ended.

The Eighties began with a new library building at Panama City Beach. The early Eighties were lean years; federal funding --library project grants, federal revenue sharing funds, public employment funds -- were slashed or eliminated. Open hours were reduced, book budgets cut, employees laid off. Under new administration in 1985, the library began a restructuring program to improve services by reorganizing staff and collections. New funding structures for regional and municipal libraries were implemented. In 1986, Calhoun County Library received additional local funding and withdrew from the System to form its own county-wide system.

By the turn of the decade, the stress of limited funding began to take its toll throughout the System. Reductions to the ad valorem tax base made it difficult for funding agencies to increase or even sustain library appropriations. In 1991, Washington County withdrew from the System; in 1992, Holmes County and Lynn Haven libraries withdrew.

In 1992, the State Library recognized that smaller, rural counties were in serious need of assistance -- library services were being threatened. In recognition of the vast variation in financial resources among Florida counties and regions, rules governing the State Aid to Libraries Program were revised to include an equalization formula that was structured to provide an effective supplement to local funds and provide multi-county grants as an incentive for counties to join together to provide cost-effective library service. While the discrepancy in

financial resources has not been overcome, the investment in public library service by the state enables NWRLS libraries to better meet the needs of the "information society" of the future.

Although the Nineties began with some downward trends, it also opened with dramatic technological changes for the library. The project to convert the system's holdings into machine-readable format was completed. Intelligent Catalogs of the system's holdings were placed in all libraries. These CD-ROM catalogs and computerized circulation systems provide information on and access to the materials available in System libraries.

In the second half of the decade, the library continues to utilize technology to provide information through on-line database searching, Internet access, CD-ROM databases and networks. Linkages through the Panhandle Library Access Network add another dimension to resource-sharing capabilities. Fax machines transmit information between libraries and directly to the patron. Networking among libraries of the NWRLS, other public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, special libraries provide access to resources that meet the educational, working, cultural, and leisure needs and interests of patrons wherever the material is without regard to their own location.

Portions of the above history were written by staff member, Ann Robbins, and presented May 28, 1987, at the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the dedication of the Bay County Public Library Building.