A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIBRARY SERVICES IN THE FLATHEAD VALLEY

Libraries played a vital role in the lives of those who first settled the Flathead Valley. Efforts to create reading rooms, book exchanges, mobile library stations, and ultimately large circulating collections have led to the network of facilities and services that we enjoy today. Digital advances enable people in Flathead County to access and receive information and materials from libraries throughout the world.

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In 1892, the Knights of Pythias opened the first public reading room in Kalispell. Two years later, The Century Club, a women's group, began to exchange books, and eventually formed the Library Fund Association of Kalispell. Their organization laid the foundation for a collection by inviting interested parties to bring a book to a social gathering.

On Dec. 20, 1897, the Association opened a Reading Room with 300 books. A few weeks later, enough books had been accumulated to start a lending department.

At the turn of the century, the collection boasted 772 circulating books and 269 reference volumes. The first paid librarian was Mrs. Florence Madison, who held the position from 1897-1904.

The collection had several homes, and in 1901 an application was made to industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie for funds to build a Carnegie Free Library in Kalispell.

On December 21, 1901, the city received the following letter from Carnegie's office at 5 West 51st Street in New York:

"Dear Sir: Responding to yours of Nov. 29th: If the city of Kalispell will furnish a suitable site and pledge itself by resolution of council to support a library at cost of not less than One thousand dollars a year, Mr. Carnegie will provide Ten thousand dollars for a Free Public Library Building. Respty yours, Jas. Bertram, P[rivate] Secy."

The city approved Carnegie's proposal on Dec 27, 1901, and purchased building lots at the corner of Third Avenue and Second Street East. The Library Commission issued a call for proposals, and in February 1903 accepted plans from Shanley and Gibson. The final cost of the building was $9,860. Construction began in the spring of that year, and the new library was move-in ready by January 1904. Its operating budget was funded with a city tax levy.

The distinctive Carnegie building at 302 Second Ave E, now the Hockaday Museum of Art, housed the Kalispell library until 1969.

The by-laws of the Carnegie Free Library permitted city residents over age 10 to apply for a card. Younger children could do so with permission from the librarian.

Students in District 5 schools also had library privileges. Adult, non-city residents could purchase a card for $1.00 a year. The reading rooms were free to all.

In 1936 the Federation of Women's Clubs proposed a County Library because many rural county residents could not afford the fee to use the City Library, which had risen to $5 per year. Their efforts paid off, and the Flathead County Free Library opened its doors in 1943 in downtown Kalispell.

Columbia Falls began its city library in 1946. It became a branch of the Flathead County Free Library in 1955. The collection moved several times before occupying its current City Hall space in 1971.

For about 20 years, schools in Evergreen, Somers, and Olney served as book stations for the Flathead County Library. Those services were terminated in 1976.

In 1956 the Flathead County Free Library joined the Whitefish Library, Kalispell's Carnegie Library, and the Lincoln County Library to form the Northwest Montana Library Federation, the first federation of its kind in the nation. A library foundation's purpose is to enhance, expand, and share library programs and services by securing financial and in-kind donations for programs, services, collections, and capital projects.

Kalispell's Carnegie Free Library combined with the Flathead County Free Library in 1967 to form the Flathead County Library System (FCLS). Two years later, the collections were combined and moved into the former US Post Office building at 247 1st Avenue East.

Bigfork's attempt to establish its own library in the 1970's culminated in a book station supported by the FCLS in 1977. It moved to rented quarters in the Bigfork Art & Cultural Center and the Bigfork Library became a branch of the FCLS in 1984. In 2018 the ImagineIf Libraries Foundation purchased the ARK building, adjacent to Bethany Lutheran Church. Fundraising for renovations is in progress, and a new Bigfork branch library is scheduled to open in 2024.

A Marion branch library opened in February 1989 as a cooperative venture between FCLS and the Marion School District. In 2023, due to staff changes and a lack of space, the school chose not to renew the interlocal agreement with FCLS, and opted to become a book drop for reserved books only.

The West Shore Community Library in Lakeside, founded in 1996, is an all-volunteer, non-profit, privately funded organization. It, too, serves as a book drop for materials from FCLS.

The Whitefish Library, in a city-owned building, remained a FCLS branch until July 1, 2011. The Whitefish City Council voted on October 18, 2010 to terminate the inter-local agreement and support the Whitefish Community Library with city taxes.

In 2014 the FCLS was rebranded as ImagineIF Libraries. Efforts to secure a larger building or a construction site for a new library in Kalispell have been considered since 2005 by the Flathead County Library Board.

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The population of the Flathead County has experienced steady growth and our libraries continue to evolve to meet the challenges of serving this population.

In 1900 Flathead County was home to 9,000 residents. As of 2023, our population has grown to 110,000.

The first local library began with just over 1000 volumes in the early 1900's. Today our county-wide system houses more than 100,000 physical items. Monthly circulation of materials is 35,000, and an average of 800 patrons come through the doors of three library branches every day.

Looking into the future, libraries will continue to play an important, vibrant, and adaptive role for people of all ages and abilities. Quality free public library services are the hallmark of a healthy community that values education, history, literacy, and opportunity.

This brief history was adapted from an extensive history entitled Turning Pages from 1892-2014, researched and written by Mary Pat Murphy for the Flathead County Library Foundation in September of 2014. Copies of that history are available at ImagineIf Library, Kalispell.