

TO THE TRUSTEES OF
BROOKS MEMORIAL LIBRARY
By Eva Leech 1974

There was a suggestion that I make a historical report, so out came a history of the library, old catalogs and old minutes of trustees' meetings. The catch is that I had so much fun reading there was no time left for writing - and so much to say!

According to "History of the Brattleboro Free Library, it's growth and development" written in 1938 by W.P.A. writers, our first library was born in 1842, but there had been a circulating library since 1821. The Library Association maintained itself by gifts and fees from its members but was not a free town public library. Almond Eddy was the first librarian. There is in existence a handwritten catalog frustratingly dateless, for those days, I think. The Dewey Decimal system hadn't been invented so this catalog shows the case and shelf on which each book can be found. After 100 years, at least, it is still legible.

In 1882 Mrs. Annie Fulton became Librarian and she did, or arranged for, the setting up of the Dewey system.

That same year (1882) the Association voted to turn its stock over to the town if the town would appropriate money to maintain a free public library. The town did.

For some years the library roamed around town, being housed in one place after another, but in 1887, through the generosity of George Brooks it found a permanent home in the Brooks Library Building next to the post office. (The area is now a parking lot). William Bradley was the librarian and he had a book catalog printed. Several copies are still extant.

Just to show how things go in circles, book catalogs, done now by computer printout, are popular again. I still don't like them, much prefer card drawers, and never really wanted to take the catalog home with me to read - one of the advantages of a book catalog I'm told.

For many years, apparently, most of the books were donated and town appropriations were spent on salaries and maintenance. The names of Bull, Davenport, Phelps and Hildreth stand out, but many, many gave most generously. As you still do.

In 1912 Mrs. Charles Loud gave books, many valuable objets d'art, and money for an addition to the building and to maintain the collection.

In the beginning, use of the library was hedged about by many, many rules. No one under 14 could borrow books and "No person except the librarian, or a trustee, shall enter any alcove or take any book from the shelves, except by special permission of the trustees." Every other year the library was closed for a week or two for inventory taking. Very few books were lost. (Oh, for the good old days!)

Gradually, of course, rules were relaxed, the age was dropped to 12 and as early as 1917 annual reports began including mention of the need for a children's room. Even before that, mention was frequently made of increased use by children. 1924 is the first year for which separate circulation figures were given for juvenile books. The Children's Room was opened in 1927, and is now a major part of our operations.

In 1908 W.E.Nims offered to start library service in West Brattleboro. The books were to be carried back and forth on the electric and he would be responsible for circulating and collecting them. After that - nothing, until 1920 when it was reported that books for scholars had been placed in the Academy building and it seemed that a branch would soon be needed. By 1945 books, adult and juvenile, had been put in the Academy School, where they could be borrowed and returned on Thursday afternoons. The next year the Branch Library was opened under the supervision of Daisie Helyar.

There are so many aspects to trace through the years. Financial support, for example, by the town. From the \$1000 voted in 1882 it has grown, slowly at first, and then by leaps and bounds. 1947 was the first year the town's appropriation was over ten thousand - \$11,500; more than doubled by 1957 to \$28,260; nearly doubled again for 1967 - \$46,929 and has more than doubled again since then.

Circulation? In 1883 it was 24,764. In the early thirties, the depression years, it hit a high of 136,356 - not achieved again for some years. In 1957 it was 109,445; 1967 - 121,907, and in 1974 it was 143,408.

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Certain threads run through the years. One is dramatized by the statement in 1917 that after the salaries, the janitor and the light bill were paid there was only \$350 left to buy books for seven months. And that is where we still are. In making our request for the next financial year we started with the salaries (which are necessary if we are to continue eating), heat, light, maintenance. By then the figure was so high that we had to "hold the line" on the book budget. It's cock-eyed, but I don't know what to do about it, either.

I was impressed with the hours the library has been open. Brattleboro has never been cheated on that score. Sunday hours have been tried, dropped, tried, dropped.

From the beginning every librarian has tried to reach more people (as we are today), to find new forms of service (as we are today) and to maintain the high standards set by predecessors (as we are today.)

Some of the things we have - like phonograph records and microfilm readers and copying machines, and do- like delivering books to beauty parlors, our child produced puppet shows and our inter-library loan service, might stagger Almond Eddy and Annie Fulton. But - who can dream what the next 130 years will bring ?

Respectfully submitted,

Eva Leech, Librarian (1974)