

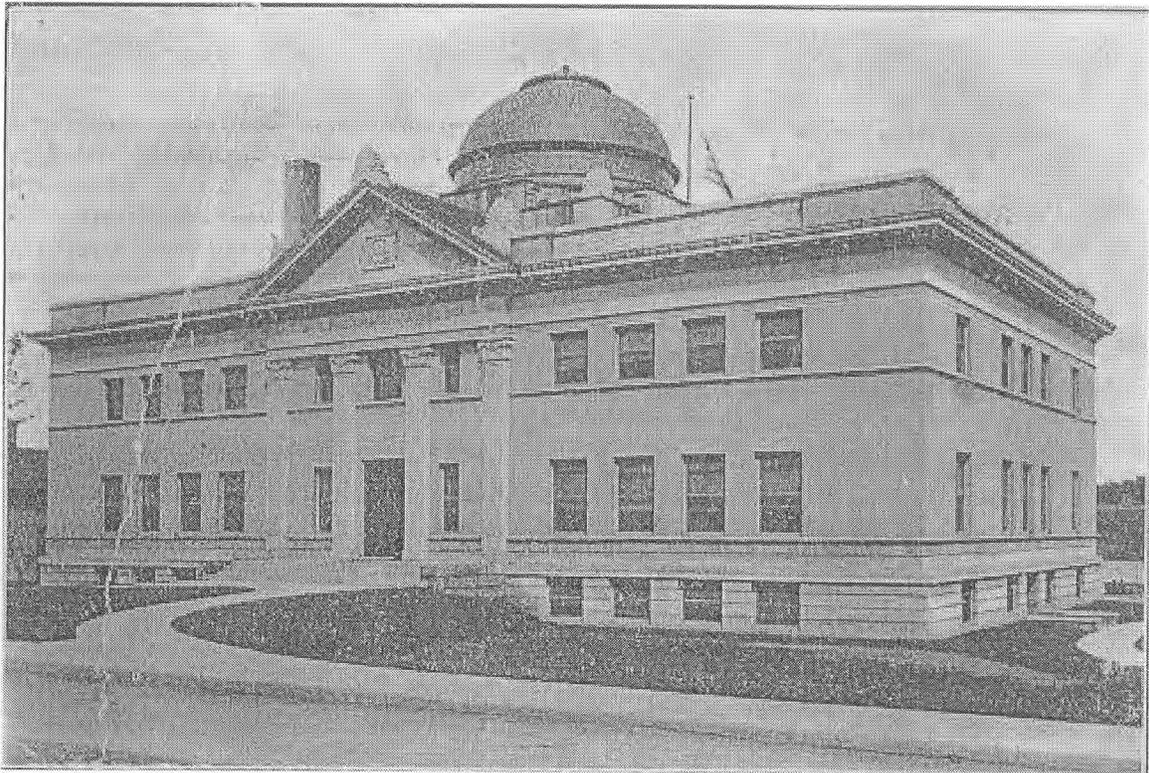
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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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## THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ROCKFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY

By David M. Oberg



The Carnegie Library in Rockford, Illinois – 1905.  
Reproduced from a postcard, courtesy of Rockford Public Library,  
DigitalPast.org

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

This issue presents an article by David M. Oberg on the history of the Rockford Public Library. The Library has a long history in Rockford and Dave does an excellent job of covering it.

Dave Oberg currently serves as the Executive Director at the Geneva History Center and as President of the Illinois Association of Museums. A Rockford native, he possesses a B.A. in History and Political Science from Rockford College and an M.A. in History at Northern Illinois University, with a focus in Museum Administration.

Oberg has worked as the Senior Museum Assistant at the Time Museum, Educator at Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum, Education Resource Manager at Midway Village & Museum Center and Development Officer for the Rockford Public Library. He is the author of *Robert Tinker's Rockford*, an award-winning guide to history and architecture and co-authored *Past Meets Present: People and Places in Old DeKalb*. He lives in Pingree Grove with his wife Sonali.

## NOTICE TO RESEARCHERS

If you have a subject that you have researched, or an idea for an article that you would like to pursue, give me a call. I would like to encourage original research into some aspects of local history that have not been adequately pursued. I can be reached at 986-4867 (evenings) or 987-5724 (day).

Thomas Powers, Editor

## UPCOMING EVENTS

The annual History Fair will be at Midway Village on January 13, 2007 at 9:00. If you haven't attended this event in the past make a point of coming to see the exhibits put together by some of our local middle school students. You will be impressed by the quality of the work! We will need volunteers to judge the exhibits so if you can help, please plan on attending. The winning entries will go on to the Regional History Fair in DeKalb.

# **THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ROCKFORD PUBLIC LIBRARY**

By David M. Oberg

## **Introduction**

Since 1872, Rockford Public Library has helped our community learn and grow. Visionary citizens, led by Civil War veteran Elias Cospers, founded a library system that served as a model to bustling cities as far away as San Francisco. Half a century later, in 1923, Rockford Public Library established Montague Branch Library, the first of its branch facilities designed to provide tailored services to Rockford's unique neighborhoods. Today, Rockford Public Library boasts six locations, meets the needs of over 150,000 people and circulates more than 1.3 million items each year. Today, I would like to share the past, present and future of this bedrock institution with you to explain how this vital institution came to be, how it has changed to meet new needs and how it will grow to meet new demands in the years to come.

## **The Past**

Although Rockford Public Library officially traces its origins to the institution established by Elias Cospers and local residents in 1872, there were actually previous attempts to create a library system in the Forest City. So important was a public library to the people of this community that in 1852, the year that Rockford incorporated as a city, local residents began agitating for a library. They created the Rockford Library Association, encouraging members to buy shares in the Library to gain access and raise funds for its creation. Unfortunately, nothing more is found in the historical record regarding this effort and it is assumed that it did not open.

Several years later, in 1855 the Young Men's Association proposed the idea of creating a library and reading room. They created a Library Committee and charged it with acquiring books from the former Rockford Library Association. Again, little else is known and it is assumed this effort failed as well.

However, in March of 1857, a new venture met with greater success. In that month, library supporters circulated subscription papers to establish a public library. Shareholders were asked to pay \$50 per share to join the association. Within the first year, local residents pledged \$1,200. By 1858, supporters raised \$6,000, allowing the first public library in the city's history to open.

The first library was organized on the third floor of the Robertson, Coleman and Company Bank, boasting 1,000 volumes and 38 periodicals. Several local men agreed to serve as librarians for a nominal salary. Unfortunately, during the Civil War, interest in the Library declined and it was

forced to close. The books were sold at public auction in 1865, with Robert Hall Tinker being the main beneficiary. Many of the original volumes may be found at Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum to this day.

Rockfordians renewed their efforts to establish a library in 1871, when they presented a petition to the City Council. An ordinance was officially passed on June 17, 1871, and a board of directors was duly appointed. A Civil War veteran, Elias Cosper, let the charge, earning himself the nickname, father of the Rockford Library.

In 1872, the library board rented three rooms but had a meager selection of books and scarce funds. To help the fledgling endeavor, William Lathrop gathered a great audience and asked that a popular subscription be passed to raise money. Roughly \$2,000 was raised that night, with an additional \$1,933.61 raised over the next year. In addition, local citizens donated 1,603 books and 422 pamphlets to help jumpstart the enterprise. Bolstered by public support, the Rockford Library Reading Room officially opened on August 1, 1872.

On February 1, 1873, the circulation department opened on the second floor of Wallach's block, at the northwest corner of State and Main. Now citizens could check out books as well as read materials in the spacious Reading Room. By June, the library's collection had grown to 2,815 volumes of which 1,608 were donations.

Over the next several years, the library continued to grow and prosper. In July, 1876, the library moved over the post office at the 100 block of West State St., where the Luther Center stands today. At that time the library's collection had grown to 7,028 volumes and sixty periodicals. 5,273 residents were officially registered as book borrowers, the library circulated 52,775 items and roughly 75,000 patrons visited the library at some point during the year. Two years later, in 1878, the library board had to withdraw 34 volumes that had been worn out and reported three volumes that had not been returned by borrowers, the first casualties of the library collection.

In 1891, reflecting the reformist atmosphere of the age, Mayor Starr appointed three women to the library board. They oversaw an annual budget of \$8,000 and issued 1,235 new cards the following year, as high unemployment drove many local residents to take advantage of the library's free books and periodicals. In 1893, as demand for library materials and usage continued to climb, the library took over the entire second floor above the post office. Two years later, the board established six traveling libraries in local schools to better meet students' needs. Then in 1896, the library embraced modernity, instituting a card catalog to allow easier navigation of the ever-increasing collection. As demand continued to rise, it became increasingly apparent that the library would soon need to vacate its rented

rooms above the post office and seek a permanent structure that could grow with the city.

On March 6, 1901 Andrew Carnegie provided an opportunity to do just that. Carnegie offered the library board \$60,000 for a library building if the city would furnish a site and a maintenance fund of not less than \$8,000 a year. Bradley and Carpenter of Rockford were selected as architects.

Unfortunately, there was considerable discussion and delay in Rockford over the location of the proposed structure. East and west side residents both argued over which side of the river the final edifice would occupy. In the end, city leaders brokered a compromise, with the library locating on the west bank of the Rock River, but with twin entrances, one facing east and one facing west to accommodate patrons from both sides of the city. In addition, the library board was committed to establishing an east side branch on 7<sup>th</sup> Street to ensure equal access to all.

Unfortunately, the bitter infighting over the library had delayed the project to the point that Rockford residents had to go back to Carnegie and request an additional \$10,000 to meet new cost estimates. Thankfully, Carnegie acquiesced and the new building opened to the public November 21, 1903. In addition to housing books and periodicals, Rockford's new Carnegie library included a Natural History collection accessible to the public. It was built in the Classical Revival style, emulating the great Greek temples of antiquity. Indeed, it was designed to serve as a modern temple of reason for Rockford's inhabitants.



The Beattie Memorial Museum. Public Library Building

Photo from the 1904 City of Rockford Annual Report

part through the efforts of the St. Angel family, still enjoys active use today and recently benefited from a \$1.6 million renovation.

By 1925, Rockford Public Library was one of only 28 in the state to offer full-time hours, six days a week. That year, the Library also opened the Fine Arts Room on the second floor, featuring books on art, music, architecture and more, with an exhibition area for the edification of the public. Two years later, reflecting the continued growth and complexity of the library system, the board established the position of supervisor of branches to coordinate and oversee library activities.

The Supervisor of Branches would soon have a full plate. With the establishment of a new facility at 11<sup>th</sup> Street and 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the library system had grown to include a Main facility and five branches. Branches included the: Southeast, Highland, Montague, Rowland and West End facilities, which all saw increased usage by the public. This represents the high water mark of the Rockford Public Library system. Though the population has grown by over 56,000 people, from 93,800 in 1929 to 150,200 in 2006, Rockford residents are still served by a Main Library facility and five branches. Branch facilities may have moved in the intervening years, but there has been no increase in the number of neighborhood branch libraries since the onset of the Great Depression.

With the Stock Market Crash in October 1929, public use of the library and its branches reflected the concerns of the age. Circulation spiked dramatically, breaking half a million items per annum, as unemployed citizens turned to the library for information and entertainment. Inspired by headlines such as "Lost His Job; Spent Time in the Library and Found a New One," Rockfordians reached out to the library for help in hard times, a trend that continues to this day. To meet this demand, Rockford Public Library used \$8,000 in emergency funds through Illinois House Bill No. 405 to purchase technical books designed to help people learn important job skills.

People availed themselves of the library for other reasons than simply self-improvement. In 1937, reader demand for the novel *Gone with the Wind* readily outstripped the supply of the best-selling book. In the interim, it was suggested that while housewives were waiting their turn to read *Gone with the Wind*, they might want to check out some of the cookbooks available at the library such as: *The Efficient Kitchen*, *How to Make Candy*, *Book of Green Vegetables*, and *The Joy of Cooking*.

The following year, in 1938, Rockford Public Library continued its outreach efforts. Roughly 200 books were earmarked to establish a hospital library service. Staff member Julia Lind took charge of this outreach activity, making two visits each week, on Tuesdays and Fridays to bring library services to patients in Rockford's hospitals. That trend continues today with outreach to area nursing homes. That year also witnessed the expansion of the children's room to keep up with demand.

The following year witnessed tremendous change for Rockford Public Library. The board extended library privileges to all residents of Winnebago County for a fee of \$2.00, roughly a day's wages at that time. Rockford residents, on the other hand, could enjoy library services free of charge. In addition, the board abolished the age limit for cardholders, extending service to patrons under the age of fifteen for the first time. To meet the special needs of younger patrons, the library established the children's room as well. In addition, the 7<sup>th</sup> Street branch opened for service, the first of Rockford Public Library's growing branch facilities.



Main Hall and Delivery Room Public Library Building

Photo from the 1904 City of Rockford Annual Report

In 1917, again in an effort to serve younger patrons, the library board and the board of education completed a "treaty" to install library substations in the public schools. Two were begun immediately at Highland and Montague schools and enjoyed a high volume of usage. In 1918, the library further extended services, issuing over 1,000 new cards to soldiers at Camp Grant. That year also saw the establishment of a new South East Branch at 1217 14<sup>th</sup> Ave and the creation of two deposit stations at 1616 West State St. and at the Women's Christian Temperance Union facility to better serve residents. By 1920, there were library books in 50 local public schools and circulation had climbed to 270,155, the highest figure in the library's history.

To keep up with rising demand, Rockford Public Library established the Montague Branch Library, dedicating it on May 24, 1923. Located at the corner of Winnebago and Montague Streets, this Spanish Renaissance-style building was designed by architect Chester E. Wolfley and is among the most beautiful structures in Southwest Rockford. This branch, established in large

In 1939, the Beattie collection of birds and butterflies, which had been at the library for 36 years, was moved to the park board museum. This collection, together with the Madeville park collection of curios and antiques would become the core collection of the Burpee Museum of Natural History. By moving this collection, Rockford Public Library was able to establish a Local History and Genealogy Room, a favorite among researchers and amateur historians throughout the region.

During the Second World War, the Library served as a valuable resource for those on the home front. Because of the rationing of staples such as meat, sugar and butter, harried housekeepers besieged librarians for recipes. There were 211 cookbooks on the shelves in 1943, including: *What Do We Eat Now?* (Low cost recipes), *Wartime Meals*, *Thrifty Cooking for Wartime* and *Sweets without Sugar*. Story hours proved a helpful resource for families, with individual story times drawing up to 100 children. The library also served as an exhibition hall for artists stationed at nearby Camp Grant.

Following the end of the war, Library staff worked to keep up with changing demographics and new needs. The former catalog room was transformed into a "teen-age youth room," with furniture donated by the local Lions Club. Former servicemen, attending college through the GI Bill, flooded the Reading Room in search of a place to study. A listening room and circulating record collection, dedicated to Rockford's servicemen, opened its doors, expanding the Library's services to include music. In 1949, the Library also acquired a movie projector, providing access to film as well. That year saw the beginning of the Library staff's efforts to preserve local periodicals and records on microfilm, a valuable tool for researchers and amateur historians.

In the 1950s, the Library borrowed and then purchased a bookmobile to further its outreach efforts and meet the needs of the underserved. The 1950s also saw the creation of the Library's first circulating film collection, a modest assortment of 16 mm reels. Over the years, that collection would evolve into thousands of films and documentaries in VHS and now DVD format. These are a favorite with local patrons.

The late 1950s saw greater efforts to include all of Rockford in the Library's programs and services. In 1957 Mayor Ben Schleicher appointed Mrs. Frances (Jesse) Robinson, the first person of color, to the library board. The next year, Library staff added a wooden ramp to the North Wyman St. entrance to increase accessibility to the facility.

Even as the library moved to better meet the needs of all of its patrons, however, the physical structure began to fail. In July 1961, the dome of the Carnegie building had to be removed due to leakage, corrosion and rot. In 1962, Charles E. Boettcher, architect unveiled a new plan for the

library, to be renovated piecemeal over the next eight years. In March of 1964, renovation of the south wing of the Library exterior was completed. In April, 1966, the board approved the addition of a third floor to the Carnegie building. On February 10, 1969, the fully remodeled Main Library building reopened, boasting carpeted risers in the Children's Theatre, a ramp for wheelchair users, and snow-melting equipment under the ramp and along the front of the library. In September, the Library also unveiled "talking books" from the Library of Congress, the first in a long line of audio books available for the public. The Library also added six public access copy machines to better serve patron needs.



A group of students listen to the phonograph in the new listening room  
Photo published in the Rockford Morning Star – January 12, 1948

In 1972, the Library began jail service under the direction of Bill Galaway and celebrated 100 years with a multi-media color slide presentation, "A Pretty Special Card." Three years later, in 1975, the Library introduced its first computerized check out system using bar codes to speed up the process of checking out materials. The following year saw the formation of the Friends of Rockford Public Library, who sell used books and use the proceeds to fund Library programs and services.

After a major reconfiguration in the 1980s, the Library saw tremendous technological change in the 1990s. On October 30, 1993 EZ Cat, the library's first Online computer, replaced the card catalog. Four years later, the computer revolution reached the public with the introduction of public access computers, allowing patrons to browse the Internet. As the world has changed, Rockford Public Library has worked to provide access to the latest information in a variety of formats.

## The Library Today

Today, Rockford Public Library serves the information and entertainment needs of Rockford's 150,000 residents through books, periodicals, audio-books, CDs, DVDs, public access computers, classes, programs, story times and more. In 2005, Rockford Public Library celebrated a number of significant milestones, including:

- Circulation of materials increased to 1,351,836 books, DVDs, CDs and audio books, making 2005 circulation statistics the highest in the Library's history.
- 962,929 people used Rockford Public Library in 2005.
- 139,443 people used Rockford Public Library's computer workstations, an 82% increase over 2004. This was made possible by the acquisition of 29 new computers through a grant-funded program.
- RPL staff helped 138,888 people with reference requests.
- The Library and its Branches offered a total of 2,118 programs and classes for the public, attended by 44,989 people.
- 14,581 people used Rockford Public Library's website. With the addition of a new Community Page in December 2005, this number will continue to climb as people find new ways to connect with community organizations and services.
- Catalog searches were up 228%, due in large part to the conversion and marketing of the new library catalog, Max.
- Our *Summer Reading Club*, titled *Read to Riches*, taught Financial Literacy to over 8,000 Rockfordians of all ages and earned our staff an invitation to present at the National Conference of Economic Educations.
- Rockford Public Library's *Harry Potter Night* drew 2,500 people downtown on a single evening.
- Library staff completed the Financial Opportunity Center (FOC) at the Main Library, with some Branch remotes, offering new resources to local small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- Library staff reached out to the Latino community through Spanish language programs, brochures, and signage with the help of a LSTA grant.

This year, Rockford Public Library has continued to bring innovation and excellence to the people of Rockford. In January, the Library embraced wireless technology, establishing wireless hotspots at all six library locations. In February, the Library staged a system-wide African American Read-in a kick-off featuring noted African American genealogist Tony Burroughs, followed by a week of celebrity readers, book discussions and more. In April, the Library established *One Book, One Rockford*, a bilingual community reading program featuring nationally acclaimed author Sandra Benitez's novel, *A Place Where the Sea remembers*. Throughout the month of April, the Library held bilingual book discussions about this gripping novel, supporting by innovative programs such as a performance by *Ballet*

*Folklorico*, a Progress Mexican dinner, bilingual story telling, cooking classes, story times and more. This program culminated in a visit by the author herself on April 28 and 29<sup>th</sup>.

The Library continues its commitment to literacy and lifelong learning with the Summer Reading Club, which draws 8,000 – 10,000 participants each year. The program provided incentives to readers who complete books and fosters a love of reading.

In addition, Rockford Public Library continues to offer great programs for patrons of all ages. These include book discussions, lectures, story time hours, dance lessons, poetry slams, game nights and more. The Library staff continues to offer important job skills training through computer classes, resume workshops and even bilingual programming. Circulation statistics continue to climb as Rockford Public Library continues to add new materials to meet new demands.

## **The Future**

The Rockford Public Library is on course for steady, continual growth and change. Change is inevitable for public libraries, and the Rockford Public Library is no different. When the Internet and World Wide Web came to prominence in late 1990s and into the 2000s, many claimed that the library was dead. While it is true that the traditional view of the library as a warehouse for books is no longer complete or valid, the Internet and digital information in general, have spawned an increased use of the modern public library. Although the spaces, means, and methods of delivery have changed, the mission of the public library has not changed. Today's public libraries are still centers for information, entertainment, culture, and the exchange of ideas.

The Rockford Public Library will continue its efforts to become more digital in nature, while recognizing the value of the written word on paper. RPL will continue to provide a variety of programming for all members of the public and, in fact, the library is currently enhancing the quality of its programs in an effort to continue as an entertainment and informational source for the citizens of Rockford. The library is also working to address issues of deferred maintenance to make the experience of going to the library better than ever.

Additionally, the library is working to locate a new branch library on the far east of Rockford to meet the needs of a growing population on that side of the city. The Rockford Public Library is endeavoring to open the new branch without running a referendum to fund the project. As the city limits on the east grow, the library is moving forward to provide a convenient location for people living there. As Rockford modernizes and grows, its library will be there to enhance life for all who live there.

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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