

NEW BROOKSVILLE LIBRARY  
PART OF LONG TOWN TRADITION

By Dick Kleiner

When the new Brooksville Library is officially dedicated, on Jan. 19, 1992, it will take its place in the town's long tradition of a love affair with books.

The tradition goes back to the early days of this century, when the first Brooksville Library was begun, in a very informal sort of way. A local physician of that era, Dr. Franklin Farrow, informally loaned books to people who asked to borrow them.

He established a small library of sorts in the front entry hall of a home in town, which was later owned by Richard Bowden. The public-spirited doctor even went so far as to hand deliver books to those who couldn't come to him.

What became of Dr. Farrow and his library is unknown, but it marked the beginning of Brooksville's continuing tradition of books and reading.

The origin of the present Brooksville Free Public Library goes back to the early '50s and its history is linked strongly to the school system.

It was a group of PTA members who, in February of 1952, felt that a library was needed. The closest existing library was in Blue Hill, and the Brooksville parents

thought the town should have its own library available for the children.

The PTA donated \$25 to the project, and a committee, consisting of Minerva Cutler, Aletha Swenson, Kathleen Andrews, Elmer Littlefield and two local ministers, Revs. Maurice Venno and George Bovil, was established to launch the new venture.

"We received permission to use part of the Town House for our library," Kathleen (Kay) Andrews recalls. "And people scrounged around in their attics and donated what books they could find.

"The library opened on Feb. 1, 1953. I remember it was a lovely day -- cold and windy, but clear. We only had a handful of books, but it was enough to start."

Aletha Swenson was the first librarian -- unpaid, of course -- and right away she had a problem to face. The children's books were housed in that portion of the Town House where voting booths were put up at election time.

"Someone objected," Kay Andrews remembers, "because of the law that no printed material could be placed in or near a polling place. Aletha had to get special permission from somebody before that was ironed out."

At first, most books were donated by local residents, but, over the years, a budget for purchasing books was established. This has grown until today the library has a good-sized budget for that purpose.

In its 40-year history, the Brooksville Free Public Library has had five librarians. After Aletha Swenson, the first paid librarian -- Gertrude Dahlsgard -- was hired in 1956. She was followed by Nan Allen, Barbara Brainerd and the present librarian, Barbara Walsh.

Two of the Brooksville Free Public Library's important adjuncts were established early in its history -- its annual book sale and its lecture series.

The first lecturer was Jose Iglesias, who was an expert on Cubs.

"Boy, did I get a blast for that one," Kay Andrews says. "One of our neighbors swept in and spread the word 'Red' all over the place. But we went ahead and Iglesias lectured on 'Cuba Today.'

"I remember he told the story of how he had visited his old grandmother in Spain, and she had asked where he was living, and he said in the United States, and she said, 'Oh, that's near Cuba, isn't it?'"

Through the years, the lecturers have included poets (Dick Eberhart and Dan Hoffman) and artists (Bill Garvey) and public figures (Archibald Cox).

Funds for supporting the library have also come from the annual book sale, which each year since it began, in the '50s has been held in the David's Folly barn, owned by one of the original committee members, Minerva Cutler.

One feature of the Library, in its early years, was a delivery service.

"One lady in town doted on Westerns," Kay Andrews says. "And so, regularly, she would get her supply of Western novels -- Zane Grey and Joseph Lincoln and others of that sort -- delivered to her door. Consequently, for a long time, our library was heavy with Westerns."

At first, with no trained librarian in charge, the Library was run on a vague, hit-or-miss system. There was no such thing as library cards; people would borrow books and simply say they would return them. Generally, they did.

Nan Allen was the first librarian who had studied library science.

"I did two things right away," she says. "I started cataloging the books we had. Before me, Gertrude Dahlsgard and her daughter had just written down the names of the books the Library had on cards, and it wasn't a good system. The other thing I did was get new curtains."

From the beginning, perhaps because of its connection with the PTA, the Brooksville Free Public Library has always maintained a close relationship with the local schools and has established programs for children.

"One year," Nan Allen recalls, "Bob McClosky (the Maine children's book author) agreed to come when we had a program for our third, fourth and fifth graders. We were all sitting out in back of the Library, waiting for Mr. McClosky. It was a beautiful day, and the kids had all brought books to be autographed.

"We waited and waited, but he never came. We found out later he had started out in his boat, from Scott Island, but, on the way, he had cut his hand badly and had gone to the hospital. So he never came."

At another point, the Library received a grant of \$500 to install a library in the elementary school. The only place in the school building where there was any room for the books was in a corner of the principal's office.

"The problem with that," Nan Allen says, "is that the office was used for other things -- and also the door to the teacher's bathroom was there. So whenever the kids wanted to borrow or return books, the room was in use or the teachers were going in and out of the bathroom.

"It wasn't a very satisfactory arrangement."

The Brooksville Free Public Library, early in its history, joined the eastern branch of the Maine Library Association. (Not all local libraries have joined that group). This enables the Brooksville Library to have access to books throughout the Maine Library system.

The relationship with the Maine Library Association is reciprocal. One of Brooksville's achievements is a fine newsletter, begun by the present librarian, Barbara Walsh, and the MLA has asked to see copies of that with an eye toward developing a similar newsletter statewide.

The Brooksville Free Public Library is now in its new home, in Brooksville's new Town House/Fire House structure. It is the latest step in the Library's long and honorable history.