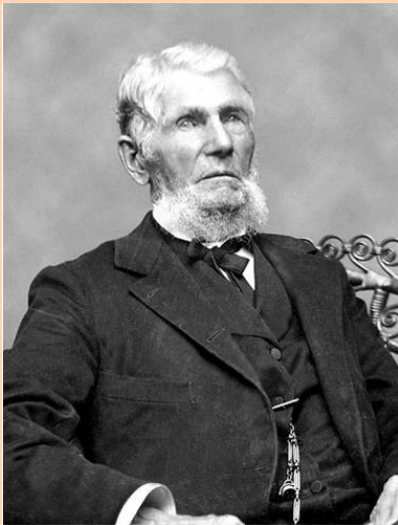


ORIGINS

(1901-1924)

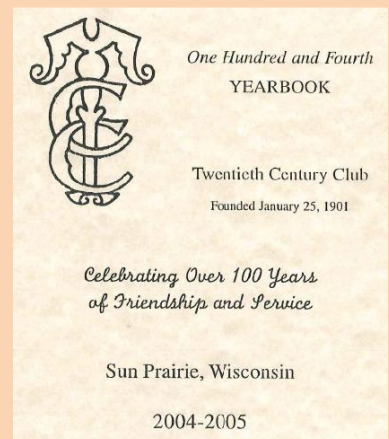
Sun Prairie was named so on June 9, 1837. The popular story goes that Augustus Bird, on an expedition from Milwaukee to found the capital of Madison, endured many cloudy and rainy days. Finally, when they came across a large prairie the sun came out and brightened the entire field, and was thus named “Sun Prairie”.¹ Augustus’ younger brother, Charles Bird, would later return to Sun Prairie and settle there in 1839. The town attracted farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, entrepreneurs, and land prospectors; everything a growing settlement would need. Along with Charles Bird, Colonel William Angell would also prosper in Sun Prairie via land prospecting and owning a tavern. The two would remain driving forces in the expansion of the settlement. Sun Prairie was incorporated as a village in 1868 with the creation of a village charter and the village would continue to see growth through the rest of the 19th century.



Colonel William Angell

Lack of a public library in 19th century Sun Prairie did not signify a disregard for reading. As early as 1879, Colonel Angell created a bill in the amount of \$8.00 dollars for the purpose of a bookcase to be located in the village hall for public use.² Other organizations also existed in the village that supported reading. The Ladies Home Social Club operated a private library in the home of one of their members since 1879. Crosse and Crosse pharmacy provided a lending library for its customers as did other businesses.³ Perhaps the impetus for the creation of a public library came about from the growing fervor in Wisconsin as a whole. The Wisconsin Free Library Commission (WFLC), created in 1895, was an advisory body throughout the state on library matters. Their influence quickly spread as activism among private groups increased throughout the 1890’s. Women’s groups especially were active in creating public libraries in their towns, most often located in town halls. In Wisconsin between 1898 and 1900, public libraries controlled by the municipal board increased from forty-seven to seventy-six.⁴ It was a women’s group, the 20th Century Club, which would found the first public library in Sun Prairie.

The 20th Century Club, founded in 1901, was the follow-up to the Ladies Home Social Club that had already been operating a private library for over 20 years. Sarah Haner, born in the neighboring township of Bristol, founded the 20th Century Club in order to promote causes such as temperance, equality, and literacy.⁵ One of the first acts of the club was to promote the creation of a free public library in Sun Prairie. A committee was created to pursue this goal and their ideas for a library were sent to the WFLC. In reply, the WFLC suggested that the village council and president had to appoint the library board and provide separate funds for the library. The village council appointed a library board in April of 1901, but did not supply any funds for maintenance purposes, proposing instead that voluntary subscriptions would fund the



Symbol of the 20th Century Club

¹ Peter M. Klein, *Sun Prairie’s People: Part I, Shadows and Dreams* (Sun Prairie: Sun Prairie Historical Museum, 1993), p6.

² Ibid, p71.

³ Ibid, p71.

⁴ David I. Macleod, *Carnegie Libraries in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wis.: Department of History, University of Wisconsin, 1968), p27-28.

⁵ Klein, p74.

library. However, the village council soon changed its mind later in 1901 and supplied a total of \$50.00 dollars that same year.⁶



Sun Prairie City Hall, built in 1895

The new city hall, built in 1895, provided the perfect location for the new library. As a community center it could provide the library with the greatest exposure to the public as possible. Other libraries in Dane County followed similar paths, including the Middleton Public Library which was founded by the Middleton Progressive Women's Club in 1927 and would move to the village hall in 1930.⁷ The Sun Prairie Public Library opened on August 29, 1901 with a collection of 208 books and additional volumes from the traveling library.⁸ The library was open to the public on Sunday evening, as well as Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.⁹ The first librarians were volunteers, but it soon became necessary to provide a salary in order to keep a librarian. Margaret Dunphy was the first librarian to receive a salary, totaling \$26.00 per year. By 1922 that number had increased to \$75.00 per year, and in 1933 it was \$150.00 a year.¹⁰ These numbers were certainly not breaking the bank. Compared to the average annual salary nationwide, these numbers were miniscule. The average trained librarian in 1892 could expect about \$570 annually, and by 1913 it was up to \$1,081.¹¹ In most cases, these numbers reflect larger libraries with longer hours of operation compared to the Sun Prairie Public Library. Still, Sun Prairie reaped quite a reward for so little expended.



Interior of City Hall. You can see the library book cases in the background. Photo was taken around 1908.

When World War I began in 1914, the United States remained neutral. It wasn't until the US joined on the side of the Allies in 1917 that censorship took hold in libraries. Wisconsin was a popular destination for German immigrants. Between 1850 and 1870 the German population in Wisconsin more than quadrupled from 38,000 to 162,000. More than four out of five of these immigrants chose to live in rural to areas like Sun Prairie.¹² Despite the large contingency of Germans, German books and publications disappeared from library shelves. The American Library Association, eager to appear patriotic, supported the "Army Index", a list of books that the federal government refused to allow in their training camps.¹³ The WFLC was also in support of banning books. In 1918, Matthew Dudgeon,

⁶ Klein, p90-91.

⁷ <http://www.midlibrary.org/library/libraryhistory.asp>

⁸ For more information on traveling libraries in Wisconsin, see: Christine Pawley, "Advocate for Access: Lutie Stearns and the Traveling Libraries of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, 1895-1914," *Libraries and Culture* 35 (2000): 434-58.

⁹ Klein, p103.

¹⁰ 20th Century Club, *The Early History of Sun Prairie*, p133.

¹¹ Joanne E. Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians." In *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, edited by Suzanne Hildenbrand (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996), p211.

¹² Christine Pawley, *Reading Places: Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p38-39.

¹³ Wayne A. Wiegand, *An Active Instrument for Propaganda: The American Public Library during World War I* (New York: Greenwood, 1989), p100.

secretary of the WFLC, wrote “The library, supported by public funds, is a part of the government which is at war with Germany and Austria and has necessarily taken sides. It is, in fact, itself in this war against Germany. To be neutral now is to be disloyal.”¹⁴ Sun Prairie was no exception to this phenomenon. It became unpatriotic to speak German, eat German foods, sing German songs, and read anything German. German books were no longer in circulation and German courses disappeared in high school.¹⁵ After the war ended, a sense of normalcy returned, and the library along with Sun Prairie began to prosper again.

¹⁴ Wayne A. Wiegand, *An Active Instrument for Propaganda: The American Public Library during World War I* (New York: Greenwood, 1989), p106.

¹⁵ Klein, p103.