

COMING OF AGE

(1924-1967)



Sun Prairie Public Library building on Main Street, 1926.

many towns in Wisconsin refused the opportunity to have a Carnegie library. Usually this was because of lack of funds, since Carnegie required a minimum of 10% of the money given to be spent in maintenance of the library every year. Often workingmen were ‘indifferent or hostile’ towards libraries.² Others believed that philanthropy could not be trusted and should not be relied upon. In 1896, Lutie Stearns, an advocate of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission wrote, “Many towns in Wisconsin are waiting for some wealthy citizen to build and endow a library. Libraries thus founded are not the best. The library that grows out of the sacrifices of the people – the one which they unitedly labor for – is the most efficient.”³ Sun Prairie was too small to be able to afford the maintenance of a Carnegie library. At the turn of the century there were about 800 people living in Sun Prairie, considerably smaller than those that received Carnegie libraries.

Failure to obtain a Carnegie library did not mean the end of the public library. Most public libraries in Wisconsin at this time existed in a single room of a larger building, or as noted above were built by numerous other philanthropists. In the early 1920’s in Sun Prairie, Mrs. John L. Kind donated the home of Charles Bird, the original settler, to the public library to use as a facility. The town decided however, with the consent of Mrs. Kind, to demolish the old building and construct a new one. Renovating the existing building would have been too costly and it would not have allowed for the space needed to

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century saw a significant amount of philanthropy directed towards libraries. Libraries were not often on the forefront of minds in the government and thus received little money. There was considerable money given to libraries from an array of donors, most notably Andrew Carnegie. Between 1901 and 1915, Carnegie gave \$1,045,611 to Wisconsin libraries. Just prior to this, between 1882 and 1900, over \$900,000 was given to various Wisconsin libraries from 55 other individuals.¹ Wisconsin was in a giving mood and Carnegie was not the only man participating. In fact,



From left to right: Arlene Moyle, Tom Stoker, and Shirley Verdoor. Tom Stoker served as librarian from 1962-1964. Photo taken 1963.

¹ John C. Colson, “‘Public Spirit’ at Work: Philanthropy and Public Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Wisconsin” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, v59, no3, (1976), p198.

² David I. Macleod, *Carnegie Libraries in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wis.: Department of History, University of Wisconsin, 1968), p35.

³ John C. Colson, “‘Public Spirit’ at Work: Philanthropy and Public Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Wisconsin” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, v59, no3, (1976), p209.

accommodate books and meeting rooms.⁴ The newly constructed library building, located on Main Street, (and now the Sun Prairie Historical Museum) and built in 1924 had 3,500 square feet of space with a main floor and a basement. The design was very similar to a Carnegie library, but most libraries during and after the Carnegie era were similar no matter who built them.



Main Street library during World War II when the Red Cross was using the club room to make surgical dressings.

for the library's magazine collection.⁵ During World War II, the club room was also used by the Red Cross to make surgical dressings.⁶ This was often the case in other libraries. The American Library Association was eager to show the value of libraries by providing services and materials to help the war effort. Another such program was the Victory Book Campaign that helped provide books to the armed forces and to prisoners of war overseas.⁷

The longest tenure by far of any librarian for Sun Prairie was Mrs. L. B. Cobb. Marie Cobb served as librarian from 1922, while the library was still in city hall, to 1966, a year before the library moved from Main Street to Windsor Street. Only two other librarians ever worked in the forty-three year span of the Main Street library; Thomas Stoker (1962-1964) and Warren Sprout (1964-1971).⁸ Marie's husband, Lyle Cobb, was Sun Prairie's veterinarian for fifty-nine years. They both lived within walking distance of their work. Their dedication to Sun Prairie is unquestionable. Peter Klein, curator of the Sun Prairie Historical Society, writes, "Marie taught generations of local residents an appreciation for reading. She created an awareness of the importance of reading to the life of the community."⁹ Margaret Dunphy, librarian of the Sun Prairie library on three different occasions, also wrote this of Marie: "Sufficient credit will never be given to Marie for all she has done for the library. I do not believe many people in the community appreciate the time and labor that she has put into the library and how much the present efficient library is due to her...in 1924 the library came into its own. Before that time it had merely existed."¹⁰



Presentation of encyclopedias to the library. From left to right: Tom Stoker, Mrs. L.B. Cobb, Mrs. J. Weiss, Dale Davis (library board Members), and Mayor A.J. Thomas. Photo taken 1960.

⁴ 20th Century Club, *The Early History of Sun Prairie*, p120.

⁵ Unpublished notes from Peter Klein, Sun Prairie Historical Museum.

⁶ Peter M. Klein, *Sun Prairie's People: Part I, Shadows and Dreams* (Sun Prairie: Sun Prairie Historical Museum, 1993), p127.

⁷ Christine Pawley, *Reading Places: Literacy, Democracy, and the Public Library in Cold War America* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p97.

⁸ Klein notes.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Klein, p92.