

HISTORY OF THE RED DEER PUBLIC LIBRARY

by G H Dawe

For fifty-three years the Red Deer Public Library sought a home of its own. In 1914 when Mr. J.F. Boyce, Inspector of Schools for the Red Deer area, spearheaded a movement for a public library in Red Deer one of the obstacles was a place to house it. The City Hall of that time had a room for the Board of Trade, and that body was willing to make a portion of it available for the library. By 1942, however, the Library space in City Hall was quite inadequate, and the Library began to look for better quarters. One proposal by the City, which was looking for space for "comfort stations" for the personnel of the Air Base at Penhold and the A20 Army Camp off 55 Street, was <sup>that</sup> the old Red Deer Creamery be converted to public toilets and public library. This met with very strong opposition from the members of the Library Board who felt that, despite the rural tradition of reading in the privy, the combination of the two in a city like Red Deer was an untenable proposition. The City, however, more practically, settled on expansion of City Hall, and the Library, in the renovations, gained the space which it felt was needed.

Within a few years this additional space could no longer fill the need. In 1948, the War Memorial Committee proposed that the Library be incorporated in the Memorial Centre, but this idea was adamantly opposed by the Library Board. The members suggested that the \$35,000 which the War Memorial Committee had on hand could be used very fittingly to build a library as a war memorial. However, this suggestion was acknowledged, but not accepted.

The next step was to give the Public Library a home in the old house which the City had renovated for use by the City Detachment of the R.C.M.P., who now were the City Police Force. The City, in 1951, offered the Library the main floor of the two-storey house and the basement. The basement later was shared with Civil Defence. The single constables roomed upstairs. When they showered too generously, the water overflowed the stall and descended through the ceiling. Despite any difficulties of this sort, the Public Library was only too pleased to move into the building in the spring of 1952.

The extra space was excellent, but the Library Board lost the privilege of free heat, light, water and janitor service which had come with the accommodation in City Hall. <sup>However,</sup> At the time of the move, the Library Board's share of the cost of the services <sup>in the new building</sup> was less than \$200 per month.

By 1958, the Library needed more and better accommodation. There was some thought of moving into the old Alberta Government Telephone building slightly to the west of the Police Building on Ross Street, but the Government was not ready to sell, and nothing came of this idea. The Library Board, in 1961, however, came forward with the idea that a library could be built from the Recreational Grant of \$175,000 which the City had received from the Provincial Government. City Council roundly rejected the idea.

The City now was planning a new City Hall. It was suggested that the Library could be in space on the second floor - at least until the City needed it. In December 1961, the Library Board expressed grave reservations, but City assured them that such accommodation would be temporary. When in May 1962 the Mayor described the facilities that would be given to the Library at the east end of the second floor of City Hall, the Library Board was delighted. The building was ready for occupancy in 1964, and for the first time in the life of the Public Library, it had new accommodation.

This accommodation, however, did not meet the approval of the Provincial Library Board and the Provincial Supervisor of Libraries, Mr. E. Wiltshire, wrote to Mayor Newman to convey to him a resolution passed by the Provincial Library Board expressing disapproval of housing the library in City Hall. The Mayor, somewhat incensed, had asked Mr. Wiltshire who had represented the City Council and who had represented the Red Deer Public Library Board when the resolution was passed. Mr. Wiltshire admitted that he was the one responsible for giving the information to the Provincial Board. The Public Library Board, however, grateful for the improved and new accommodation, expressed their satisfaction with the move, particularly as it was to be temporary accommodation.

Communities were in 1964 looking for suitable projects to commemorate Canada's Centennial. The Library Board, now meeting in the Committee Room of City Hall, on April 29, 1964, proposed that a building to house Library and Archives would be most suitable, and this proposal went to City Council. The Archives had been established by separate by-law as an entity, but the Library Board had agreed earlier to house the Archives.

The Library Board now asked the City to apply the funds from the sale of the building site of the old library building to a new building fund. The City's reply was that \$1,300 per year for each of three years would go to such a fund. A library-construction committee of citizens was formed and, by December 1964, the Finance Committee of City Council had recommended that a sum in the neighborhood of \$325,000 be available to construct a new library, preferably on City Square. Construction would begin in the fall of 1966, and would be completed in 1967. A publicity committee was also formed, undoubtedly with a fear that a plebiscite might be asked, and <sup>monies</sup> plebiscites in Red Deer had not fared very well.

But all was not clear sailing. Although the Library Board favored City Square as a location, forces within the City said it should be elsewhere. A parking lot on 51st Street, west of 49th Street, was considered. However, the most favored alternative to City Square was a site on Ross Street beside the Professional Building. The architect prepared sketch plans. The City officials then found that the proposed site was under option and so it was planned that <sup>the library</sup> it should go to a site near the Recreation Centre. New sketch plans were prepared for this location. There were, however, some unhappy people on the construction committee who strongly favored a library on or near City Square. The whole project almost foundered when a plebiscite on funds for a library, at the October elections, was rejected by the ratepayers: 56.15% against it and only 43.85% in favor of the project, despite vigorous campaigning to win support by the Citizens' Information Committee.

At first the Library Board was ready to accept defeat. Then forces rallied to the cause and the City decided it could find \$275,000 for the project. A Butler building of 17,000 square feet was proposed, but the construction committee rejected it. Plans were prepared for a building

of conventional construction, with 9,000 square feet on the main floor and 9,000 square feet on a finished basement, at a total cost for building and equipment of \$275,000. Before tenders were called, Mr. and Mrs. Snell, tentatively in June and finally in July of 1966, offered to donate \$55,000 provided that the Library would be located on the site of the parking lot on City Square, south of City Hall. This incentive removed all objections. With an estimated cost now of \$330,000, the Centennial Library on City Square was on its final course. The title of the site, by the way, was registered in the name of the Library Board. The architect now prepared plans for a building on City Square. It was to have 7,500 square feet in the basement, estimated at \$15 per square foot, and 7,500 square feet on the main floor estimated at \$20 per square foot, with a total cost of construction at \$262,500. Furniture, landscaping and fees would raise the total to \$327,250.

The City now set up a Centennial Library Fund. It consisted of \$54,212 from the Centennial Confederation Act Grants, \$100,000 from debentures, \$21,000 from Winter Works Incentive Grants, \$55,000 from private donation (the Snells') and \$99,788 from the Centennial Library Reserve. With this financing, no plebiscite would be necessary.

As might be expected, when bids were opened on December 16, 1966, they exceeded estimates. The low contractor's bid was \$305,600 and with other essential costs, the total was \$336,504, a figure \$6,504 over available funds, and nothing for furniture. Negotiations brought the contractor's price down to \$300,505. By charging some of the previous planning costs elsewhere, the total, including \$10,000 for furniture, was brought in at \$338,000, and revenues were found to match this expenditure. Nothing now could stop the Red Deer Centennial Library. Construction of it began.

The new building received several donations. The County of Red Deer contributed almost \$7,700 from its Centennial Grant. The local Engineers' Association paid for a commemorative plaque to honor the Snells. The Rotary Club donated and installed a stereo system. Items of furniture came from other organizations.

On November 3, 1967, the Red Deer Centennial Library was officially opened by His Excellency, the Right Honorable Roland Michener, C.C., Governor General of Canada. The programme listed facts and figures on the building,

and acknowledged the many donations. It also contained salient prompts in the history of the Public Library from 1914 to 1967.

The Public Library now had a home of its own. It already had extended its services by branches in schools such as Eastview, West Park, South Hill and North Hill. Annual circulation had passed the 200,000 mark.

By the late Seventies, the Library Board began to feel the pressure for more space. The Centennial Library had been built to take a second storey, if necessary. Although the space was necessary, the money was not there, and it was only when Mr. Donald Bower, in 1978, most generously donated \$250,000 for an addition to the Library, that the second storey became possible. Mr. Bower's gift, a grant of \$296,747 from the Department of Culture of the Government of Alberta, and a contribution of \$46,747 from the City, raised the total of some \$594,000 necessary for the project. The second storey, including an art gallery at the east end, had its official opening on May 27, 1979.

At the time of writing this account, April 1980, the Library Board is involved in a joint venture with the City and the Public and Separate School Boards, to build and to operate a consolidated library of 7,200 square feet, including 1,500 square feet in ancillary rooms, in the mall of the G.H. Dawe Community Centre. This library will serve the public and the pupils of the two schools that form a part of the Centre.

So much for the building. However, libraries are much more than physical facilities. Public libraries in Alberta became possible in 1907, two years after the Province was born, when the new Legislature passed the Public Libraries Act. Almost immediately, Mr. J.F. Boyce, Inspector of Schools, and Mr. W.J. McLean, Principal of the Public School, tried to launch the project of a public library for Red Deer. But the town had no building for it, and little enthusiasm to provide one. The churches thought of placing a public library in one of their buildings, but the fear of creating or increasing interdenominational jealousies killed that idea. The Horticultural Society, however, picked up the challenge and appointed two of its members, Mr. A.W.G. Allen and Mr. Boyce to find the ways and means of establishing a free public library in Red Deer. On February 26, 1914, the committee placed

the matter before the City Council. (Red Deer had become a city in 1913), and perhaps the City fathers, realizing the importance of their new status, decided to support the idea with a grant of \$300. Local subscription could raise an equal amount - in fact \$479.25 was so raised - and the Board of Trade would share its space in City Hall. On April 23, 1914, By-Law No. 363 brought the Red Deer Public Library into being. Its first Board consisted of J.F. Boyce, H.H. Gaetz, F.C. Whitehouse and J. Watson.

The petition to Council had the signatures of 133 citizens, who listed their occupations from tent-maker to gentleman, the last title apparently indicating someone who had the means to live without a regular job. The subscription list was led by Edward Michener Esquire, M.P.P., who contributed \$25. The smallest subscription was \$1, an amount not to be scorned in those days. The Natural History Society donated \$40 and as a result, all its members had free access to the books, regardless of whether or not the members lived in Red Deer. The Village of North Red Deer gave \$40 for which its residents gained the same privileges. In fact, the Village annually contributed a small sum, except during the depression years, to retain the right of residents to use the Library. The amount was \$5 per year initially, later \$7.50 and finally \$12.50. Of course, the need for this subscription ended when the Village became part of the City in 1948.

From this bit of evidence it can rightly be assumed that the Red Deer Public Library has always made its services available to the Red Deer district as well as to the City, at a nominal - or no - charge. In fact, in 1914, then the petitioners respectfully "prayed" that the City of Red Deer establish a public library, the accompanying brief stated that a public library "would serve a wide constituency with good reading matter; it would become the repository for valuable reports and publications of learned societies; and in the course of a few years we would have both a good reference and a good circulating library, a centre from which would radiate an elevating influence, not only upon the City, but upon the surrounding district." The last phrase indicates the vision of the founders.

No one did more to achieve this noble ambition than did Mr. Charlie Snell, a local surveyor. He became a member of the Board in 1920, and the Chairman of it in 1932. His wife served as Librarian, under her maiden name of Miss Mabel Besant, from 1931 and under her married name of Mrs. C.H. Snell from

1943, until both Mr. Snell and she left the Library in December 1952. In giving his reasons for leaving, Mr. Snell stated that perhaps his 31 years as a member of the Board, and his wife's 20 years as Librarian, had brought both of them to an appropriate time for retiring, particularly as the Library was to have a new set-up in another building across the street from City Hall.

Mr. Snell's interest in the Library did not end with his retirement. In 1966, when there was much controversy about the location of the Centennial Library, he neatly solved the problem when he and Mrs. Snell donated \$55,000 to the new building, provided that it was to be located on City Square. He realized the importance of a central location. He also knew how to remove any objection of City Council to using the parking lot south of City Hall for a library site.

The Snell Gallery in the Centennial Library commemorated the work of the Snells. At the time of writing (1980) Mr. Snell is approaching the age of 100 years, a man with a keen mind and a tremendous store of historical knowledge of Red Deer and Alberta.

From the first meeting of the Library Board in 1914 it was customary for the Mayor of the City to attend meetings of the Board, as he was considered to be ex officio a member of it. Mayor Stan Carscadden set the example in 1914. His successors followed his pattern. When Mr. Ed Barrett held the office of Mayor from 1965 to 1974, he seldom missed a meeting. At present, however, the size of the City has made it difficult for the Mayor to attend meetings except the ones in which there is an item of particular concern to him.

It was customary also to have one or two councillors on the Library Board as fully accredited members. Mr. F.J. Watson, a councillor of 1914, was the first to serve. In 1961, Mrs. Ethel Taylor, a new alderman, became Council's representative on the Board. After she dropped out of the municipal government in she later joined the Library Board as a citizen representative. She has worked diligently at the local and Provincial levels to promote libraries in Alberta.

It is difficult to pick out names of Library trustees for special mention. Mr. F.J. Boyce and Mr. Charlie Snell have already been mentioned as Chairmen of the Board. Dr. W.B. Parsons also served capably as a trustee and as the Chairman from 1970 to 1975. Mr. Bob Scammel was Chairman through the planning and building of the Centennial Library. Mrs. Alice Hogan, the present Chairman, assumed the office in 1975, after many years as a member of the Board.

There have been many librarians who may be noted for the quality of their service and for the length of it. The first librarian was Miss Ina Greene, hired in 1914. She served about one year before moving from the City. She now (in 1980) resides in Medicine Hat.

Mrs. Seth Pameley was the fifth librarian. She held office in the library in City Hall from 1922 to 1931. Some, now elderly, citizens of Red Deer remember how she censored the books which children took from the Library. The Thornton Burgess books on Peter Rabbit and his friends of the Briar Patch were quite all right for young fry, but Hop-a-long Cassidy stories were something else. They were westerns that politely converted cuss words to the initial letter followed by a dash. However, they were good adventure stories for small boys who worshipped the cowboy image, and by one strategy or another, small boys got them past Mrs. Pameley. The really bad books, which no small boy ever saw, were discreetly kept in Mrs. Pameley's desk. One wonders if she even let the adults take them.

Mrs. C.H. Snell, née Mabel Besant, set the record with her 20 years of service as librarian. Miss Winnifred Alford followed her and served five years. Mrs. Gilda Russell served seven years as librarian, followed by several years as first assistant librarian. Mr. MacDonald Coleman was the first professional librarian, hired in 1964. He continues as Director and may yet break Mrs. Snell's record. Certainly the growth of the Public Library since 1964 is the result of the charm and competence of Mac Coleman.

Perhaps a few of the secretaries might be mentioned. Even F.J. Boyce, when he returned to Red Deer and the Library Board in 1919, had a go at being secretary. Mr. Snell served as secretary for eleven years, followed



by twenty years as Chairman. Kerry - his friends called him Nobby - Wood filled the position capably for fourteen years from 1932 to 1946. Dick Beresford held the office for five years, 1947 to 1952. Mrs. Isobel Smith kept the minutes for two years, 1953 to 1955. When G.H. Dawe was appointed to the Board in 1956, he was immediately assigned to the office of Secretary, a position which he has held for twenty-four years, a record of endurance - or forbearance by the Trustees.

Some of the assistants have a long record of efficient and loyal service. (The great contribution of Mrs. Gilda Russell has already been mentioned.) One of them is Mrs. Anne Trenaman who joined the staff in May 1958 when the Library was in the old police building. She has continued through to 1980, the last few years on part-time. Mrs. Thelma Foster, who came to the Library in 1958, as a part-time secretary and bookkeeper, most capably filled these offices until she left for the coast where she died suddenly in 1980. She was then Mrs. Digby de Balinhard. Mrs. Ebba Dyck (1963) and Mrs. Frances Keith have also contributed to the Library over many years. The list could go on and on.

By 1980, the Library had three librarians with University degrees. They were Mr. Mac Coleman, head librarian since 1964, Miss Paula Lefaiivre, reference librarian hired in 1978, and Miss April Covey, who joined the staff as a program librarian in 1979. The services of these three have contributed greatly to the Red Deer Public Library. The Library now offers reference service, with inter-library loans throughout the Province, programs and services for children and for seniors, films, records, xeroxing and microfilm. The circulation in 1979 was 261,104, of which 63,299 was from the four branch libraries. Art exhibits are regular features in the new art gallery. The Snell Gallery and the Canada Room are used regularly by the public. Red Deer Public Library is one of the best in the Province.

Despite its current high level of service, there are now even greater possibilities for the Public Library. The Provincial Government has increased the per capita grant to \$3.00 in 1980. There is also Provincial support for inter-library loans. In 1914, the Government provided nothing but a matching grant for money raised locally for the purchase of books, and thereby qualified

for a grant estimated at \$300. The City paid an operational grant of the same amount, and of course, by using the Board of Trade room, the Library had no costs for space and utilities. The Librarian, paid at the rate of 33 1/3 cents per hour, cost the Board about \$10 per month. In 1980 the Library Board's budget was well over \$400,000, of which \$238,000 was to go to salaries. The City was asked to contribute \$283,000. The Government grants were expected to be close to \$130,000, about \$56,500 over the original estimate of \$73,500. These figures, of course, in 1980 were for a city of 40,000. In 1914, the City's population was only about 2,150 and the Village of North Red Deer had approximately 325 people.

In 1980 the outlook for the Red Deer Public Library is most promising. It has reached its present stage of development as a result of the general growth of the Province and in particular the growth of Red Deer. However, it is only fair to say that wealth and numbers would have accomplished little if it had not been for the foresight and the dedication of many citizens who served on the Board and for the loyal and devoted service of staff who, by their willingness to serve the public pleasantly, have built up a large body of patrons who use and praise the Red Deer Public Library.

GHD