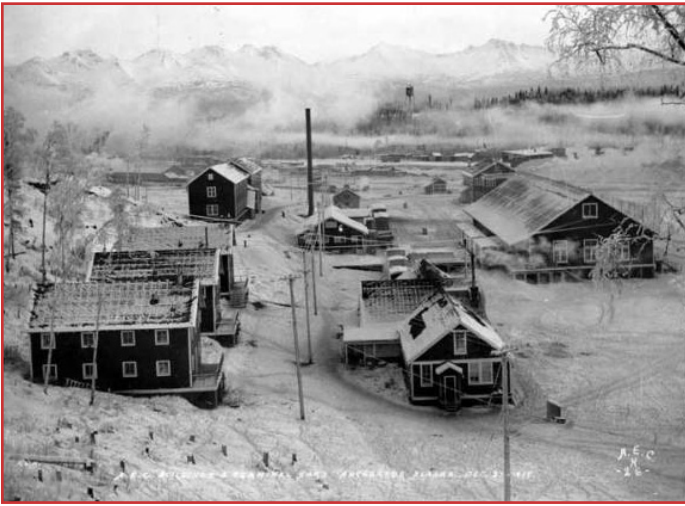




OUR HISTORY
1917 — 2011



ANCHORAGE PUBLIC LIBRARY



Anchorage Engineering Commission terminal yard, 1917. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.*



Anchorage City Hall, 1917. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.*

Published December 2011, in honor of the 25th Anniversary of the Z.J. Loussac Library in its new location. This is a second edition of a 1996 publication *Looking Back: A Short History of Public Libraries in Anchorage* by longtime library employee Jackie Musgrave. Musgrave received support from Anchorage Museum of History and Art and the Anchorage Public Library Alaska Collection. 2011 update by APL staff Clare Stockert.

Anchorage pioneers were a scrappy bunch in 1915, pouring by the hundreds into the muddy, rough-and-tumble Ship Creek tent city that sat squarely in the middle of nowhere. With hopeful hearts and visions of a bright, promising future, they set about building a real town in the barely-tamed Alaskan wilderness.

Determination, dedication and enthusiasm were on their side, but they had to deal with weather, wildlife, a shortage of modern conveniences, and endless delays in receiving materials from Outside. Still, they persevered.

In an unbelievably short time, the new frontier town took shape. Tents vanished, to be replaced by houses, churches, banks and flourishing businesses (Two Girls Waffle House advertised “pies like Mother tried to make”). As early as 1917, property owners along 4th Avenue between B and K Streets voted to finance the longest and widest paved sidewalks in the Territory.

Families settled in so fast that the original schoolhouse couldn't accommodate all the students. The Anchorage Woman's Club, founded in 1915 and destined to be a major force in the city's cultural arena, tripled its membership in the first two years.

Residents turned their attention to the social side of life. Dances at Robarts' Hall were popular weekend affairs, and audiences sat enthralled by black-and-white films that jiggled silently across the big screens at the Empress and Harmony Theatres. Home talent concerts, plays and sports events attracted large crowds of participants and spectators alike.

The time was ripe for one more prime endeavor: a public library. As for its actual origin, two stories collide. Each is based on a thread of truth, but neither has more than sketchy historical documentation. And in the grand tradition of Alaskan tales, since the threads do eventually weave together, both are worth telling.

The first account is that the library effort was launched when a Virginia women's auxiliary looking for a worthy service project asked for ideas from Peter Trimble Rowe, Episcopal Bishop for Alaska. Firmly believing the Territory lacked cultural amenities, and determined to remedy what they saw as a grave omission, they followed

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the Bishop's suggestion and voted in July 1917 to give a library to Anchorage. Rev. E.W. Hughes, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church, was chosen as acting librarian, since the books would be housed in his Parish Hall.

Each of the Virginia ladies searched her own bookshelves, carefully choosing one or two titles suitable for donation to what was surely perceived as a lonely, forsaken outpost of igloos and polar bears. While this package was being made up, the Cook Inlet Pioneer newspaper issued an open invitation to its Anchorage readers, urging them to write friends Outside and ask for contributions of books.

The response was so gratifying that the library quickly demanded more time than Rev. Hughes could give. By year's end, he had handed over the collection and the responsibility to the Anchorage Woman's Club (AWC).

The second version gives full credit for the entire enterprise to the AWC, whose educational committee saw a need and vigorously pursued filling it. By their account, the July 1917 date stands, but Virginia had nothing to do with it. Local members were the ones who wrote to Seattle for advice, collected books, volunteered their time, raised funds and planned a combination library and social center to be built that fall.

World War I took precedence, however, and the AWC library fund of \$195 was donated to the Red Cross, while the books were loaned to the public school and the Episcopal Church library.

Here the two stories join, to follow a common path. Perhaps, in the beginning, there were two separate libraries. Perhaps there were three or four - a 1916 picture of Sydney Laurence's photo studio on 4th Avenue shows the neighboring storefront with a large EXCHANGE LIBRARY sign. But Laurence occupied his studio for little more than a year, and other pictures during that timeframe clearly show the sign reading ICE CREAM.

Adding to the confusion, the 1917 Anchorage City Directory lists a circulating library at an address three blocks west. In any case, it is evident that All Saints Episcopal Church and the AWC were central figures in early Anchorage library history, with heavy involvement from the Presbyterian Church, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club and American Legion.

Over the next decade the library, run on a subscription basis, hobbled along at All Saints. Legend holds that at least part of the collection even spent time in the home of Mary Weber, an early library activist whose lack of professional training was balanced by her enthusiasm, energy and love of books.

Still, the budget remained virtually pennies, the staff consisted mostly of Woman's Club volunteers, and open hours were erratic at best and finally nonexistent. This led to action by a concerned public.

In October 1922, a group of private citizens formed the Anchorage Public Library Association (APLA), naming Rev. Burdette Landsdowne president and Frank Bartholomew librarian.

The newly-formed association's original thought was to hold joint occupancy of the old Elks Building with the American Legion. An alternate plan was adopted, as free library space was offered in the rear of Bolte's Hardware.

Grass-roots support swelled. The AWC gave its entire building fund of \$526 toward the purchase of new books. Baxter's Busy Corner placed a contribution box "in a particularly prominent place."

First Presbyterian Church sponsored an auction sale with proceeds split three ways among the Ladies' Aid Society, Near East relief and the public library. The Presbyterians also wanted to donate their Sunday school library, and tracked down overdue books via the effective method of publishing tardy borrowers' names in the newspaper.

On December 8, 1922, the Anchorage Public Library opened with 820 books on the shelves. For \$1 per year adults who were property owners could buy library memberships; children's cards were free. Renters could obtain the \$1 cards if two property owners signed the registration form, and transients were allowed borrowing privileges for \$2, half of which was refunded if all books were returned when the visitor left Anchorage.

Community endorsement was generous, from the smallest Blue Birds and Camp Fire Girls to the American Legion, which made a long-term loan of its own library collection. In a return show of support, the APLA designated a magazine shelf for the use of all residents, cardholders or not. Bundles of magazines were also sent to men at nearby camps.

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The board proudly noted that in January 1923 an average of 50 books per open day had been borrowed by 132 patrons, 57 of whom held paid memberships. One can only imagine the beehive activity at the library as those 452 books were checked out during very limited hours two afternoons a week.

At the Public Library Association's first annual meeting, members voted to request that the Anchorage City Council assume control of the library, "to the end that it may be kept open daily." But the council simply didn't have the resources to fund the enterprise.

Frank Bartholomew, re-elected as librarian, was faced with a number of problems, not the least of which were overdue materials and public relations. The board dealt with the first concern by hiring a high-school student to track down delinquent borrowers. Publicity was handled by placing an identifying sign at the library entrance, and distributing half a dozen framed informational cards for display in various hotels.

Statistics for 1923 showed steady growth, with 4,117 books borrowed. The compelling question in December was whether to invest in an expensive set of encyclopedias. One of the board members, Mrs. Frank Carlquist, loaned her personal set for reference use, so actual demand for the item could be ascertained.

Four months later, the encyclopedia had proven its worth. Mr. Bartholomew, planning a Seattle trip, offered to buy a set there, saving the considerable trouble and delay of ordering through the mail. This method of purchase had been handy the previous summer, when APLA secretary Fredericka Mossman was assigned the task of finding and buying card-catalog drawers while visiting Portland.

During the summer of 1924, the library moved from Bolte's to the courthouse, where the rear room was to be used for books and the middle room for reading "when court is not in session." A stove was installed, the City Council agreed to provide free light during the hours of operation, and APLA board members unpacked, organized and shelved materials.

The library, after a lengthy closure, opened again to the public on October 4. A series of volunteers, nearly all from the AWC, took turns staffing the desk.

The board chose to raise funds with some favorite activities of the time - performances and card parties. The first party, in April 1926, was attended by a large crowd and netted \$33.05 for new books. A hugely popular melodrama, presented on the Empress stage later in the year by the Little Theatre Club, brought in \$75 and won glowing reviews.

By now, it was clearly unfair to expect the Woman's Club to continue supplying volunteer librarians, particularly when other Alaskan towns supported their libraries with city funding. So in September, the club joined with the Chamber of Commerce and the APLA to officially seek City Council involvement. A salary of \$50 per month was requested for a librarian who would also serve as caretaker of the Chamber of Commerce information bureau. The group recommended Anna David, wife of Anchorage's first elected mayor, for the position.

The Council considered the outstanding track record of both the library and the Chamber of Commerce, and in October 1926 hired Mrs. David at the requested salary. But Council minutes the next spring reflect difficult budget adjustments. In an economical move, Mrs. David was cut back to "summer months only," and the city attorney and fire chief were reclassified to "as needed" status.

The picture was a little brighter by fall, when the Council authorized a \$25-per-month stipend to apply toward



Aerial view of Anchorage, 1925. Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.

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the librarian's salary, with the APLA eventually adding \$10 to that amount. Library hours were still unbearably short; everyone crowded in at the appointed times, 4-5 p.m. and 6:30-7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

When Anna David took a leave of absence in August 1928, APLA president Mary Wever was named acting librarian - an appointment that soon turned permanent, and in which she served for 17 years.

1929 brought some improvement in finances; the Territory of Alaska passed legislation providing annual \$150 grants for incorporated library associations. Mrs. Wever leaped at the opportunity and immediately incorporated her group.

Impressed by the APLA's initiative, the City of Anchorage gradually began to subsidize the library, but the budget remained negligible. The 1930 financial report showed the APLA ending the year with a balance of \$27.77. In addition to 85 paid memberships, there was extensive free usage by visitors, researchers, teachers and nearly 200 children.

A curious note in APLA minutes reveals that in 1935, after apparently shivering through years of annual board meetings on the second Monday of September, members changed the election date to take advantage of gathering on a day when the library was heated.

A brand new City Hall was constructed on 4th Avenue between E and F Streets in 1936, and in early 1937, most of the city departments had moved in. The library, assigned space on the top floor, sedately rubbed elbows with such neighbors as the Mayor, City Council, police chief, a contingent of firefighters, and three jail cells.

Bake sales and card parties continued to ease budget woes somewhat, but hours of operation remained a sore point. Even by 1940 the library was open only two days a week. The APLA board doggedly requested city funding to cover a five-afternoon schedule. At last an agreement was reached that November, and the library gladly announced its new schedule: Monday through Friday from 3-5 p.m. and 7-9 p.m.

Mrs. Wever's salary was increased to \$100 a month in compensation for the longer hours. Memberships were still being sold for \$1, rental of new titles cost patrons 10 cents a week, and overdue fines were assessed. As funds trickled in through these fees, Mrs. Wever bought more books, enlarging the collection enough to support the loan of 25 volumes a week to the USO.

The war years cast a shadow over Anchorage, but the library remained a lantern shining in the gloom. Servicemen and civilians found welcome and a congenial atmosphere in the little public facility - even if there was barely room to turn around. Once again, larger quarters were needed. The APLA kept asking the city to take over responsibility for the library, and bit by bit, the City Council eased into more involvement.

Early in 1945, the Council's finance committee was instructed to find and purchase a steel building which could be renovated into a library and then dismantled after the war. Though some of the councilmen called the



Librarian Mary Wever. *Photo courtesy of APL Archives.*

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estimated \$10,000 cost “the best bargain the city ever got,” Mayor John Manders vigorously objected to the idea of a temporary structure, and dubbed it “the Cow Palace” - a name that stuck even before the building was in place.

Amid the swirl of arguments and plans that April, Mrs. Wever was stricken with sudden illness and entered the hospital. Within a month, she had retired. This unexpected and distressing absence of its major mover-and-shaker left the APLA in shock. While Aleta Belgard and Myrtle Hulbrick substituted as librarians, serious consideration was given to the problem.

There was only one reasonable solution if the library were to be kept active, and that June the City Council finally accepted the APLA's offer to transfer all its property and assets to the City. The Mayor promptly appointed a new library board, consisting of Alaska Railroad bookkeeper Don Rozelle, Rev. Rolland Armstrong of the First Presbyterian Church, and music teacher Mrs. C.T. Rewak, to oversee the operation.

Mary Wever died on August 9, leaving library users with both a rich legacy and a vast sense of loss. While the rest of the nation jubilantly celebrated V-J Day on August 14, the APLA board somberly held its final meeting, dissolved its organization, and formally presented the library, with all its holdings, to the city.

Unfortunately, the transfer occurred after the annual budget was set, and there was no money available for books or staff. With a move on the horizon anyway, it was simpler to close the library for the time being, and on August 15 the door was locked.

The City Council's authorized purchase, the Cow Palace, had been set near the corner of 5th Avenue and E Street, and spurred passage of a new ordinance to regulate the moving of temporary structures into Anchorage.

Covering all bases, the Council drafted Section 1 to read, “Temporary structures shall include but shall not be limited to those structures known as Quonset huts, Pacific huts, Butler's and Stouts, and all other buildings of a temporary nature.”

It is uncertain exactly what the Cow Palace was. A letter to the City Council in July protested “Quonsets at 5th and F,” the general location of the library building. But patrons of that era variously recall the library as a Quonset hut, a Thompson hut, a steel storage building and even an old railroad car, and no detailed photos are easily found. In any event, it was meant to be temporary. The Council couldn't know, as they drafted their ordinance and set a two-year restriction, that the Cow Palace would serve as the library for nearly a decade.

With the building in place, the new library board was instructed to forge ahead with the renovation. This was difficult, because neither the board nor the City Council had any idea of exactly how to make a library.

By a stroke of good fortune, Willetta Matsen, a trained and experienced librarian, had recently moved to Anchorage from Oregon. Straightaway, she was offered a position, which she accepted only on a temporary basis, and given her first task: to organize and move the Anchorage Public Library. She did have a support network. Residents threw themselves into the community project.

The Rotary Club pledged substantial financial aid, and a large group of volunteers joined city workers to refurbish the Cow Palace with a goal of opening November 5. But the bulk of the job fell to Mrs. Matsen. Not only did she have to weed, mend and catalog the existing collection, she was faced with sorting an entire room piled with books intended for addition to the library's holdings. As she began the Herculean task, she concurrently planned the move, addressed the Woman's Club and Rotarians, and went on radio to publicize the library.

In articles for Pacific Northwest library publications, she described some of the obstacles: “No one familiar with the physical needs of a library was consulted when the floor plan was decided. Consequently, such necessary items as a workroom with light, air, and running water were not thought of...The walls curved, making it hard to put bookshelves near them...It was hard to heat, and the floor cold.”

Moving day crept closer as Mrs. Matsen recruited board members and friends to help tie books into neat, numbered bundles that could easily be transferred in proper sequence. The Cow Palace was situated on the same block as City Hall, so the actual distance wasn't great. But there were complications.

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“One of the council members,” wrote Mrs. Matsen, “was in charge of the heavy equipment division of the Northern Commercial Company. When moving day arrived, he wheeled a crane from his stock into position beneath one of the front windows. For that day and the next two, the Chairman of the Board and I pushed bundles of books over the window sill.

“We deposited each bundle in a wooden box on the end of the crane, the councilman maneuvered it from the second floor window to a waiting truck where it was emptied by a couple of youths hired for the occasion, and then it was returned to our window ledge for another load of books. When full, the truck was driven to the new location...Another truck pulled into place under the window, and the pushing process continued...This went on unceasingly until the room was bare and our tummies black and blue from leaning over that window ledge.”

The books were to be shelved “in numbered order, all precise and neat.” But unbeknownst to the librarian, the shelves were still wet with paint. Volunteer movers, lacking other options, used the only space available.

Thus, when Mrs. Matsen arrived at the Cow Palace, she was horrified to see “between 6000 and 8000 books,

bookcases, shelves from the stacks, tables, chairs, old files of the National Geographic, and other articles too numerous to mention piled in a great heap on the floor. Drawing a good, deep breath, we attacked the heap the only possible course in such a situation.”

Somehow, it all got finished on time for the grand opening November 5, 1945. In a heroic effort, Mrs. Matsen’s husband worked late into the night varnishing the small-sized furniture in the children’s section.

The library, enthusiastically welcomed by the city’s reading public, was an excellent example of the old adage, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” The Cow Palace’s unlovely exterior hid a cheerful, attractive reading room filled with books, green plants, artwork and shining new shelves of books.

Hours of operation were extended to cover six days a week from 2-6 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. The Rotary Club’s pledge ensured that the library was safe until the April 1946 municipal budget could take over, but there was temporarily no money for custodians. Library board president Don Rozelle promptly enlisted Rev. Armstrong, three City Councilmen and Mayor Manders in his volunteer janitorial corps, with each man working one night a week.



Librarian Willetta Matsen. *Photo courtesy of Ward Wells Photos.*



Junior high students visit the “Cow Palace,” 1952. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center ww236-1.*

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In November, the Rotarians launched their campaign to benefit the library. They met their \$2500 pledge goal in a unique manner, by financing and then raffling off a brand-new house being built at 626 N Street. The winner turned out to be a Fort Richardson soldier who had purchased a single \$1 ticket. He had since left the Army and returned home to North Carolina, with no interest in moving back to Alaska, but the library was secure.

The reading public loved its Cow Palace, and appreciated the librarian's weekly newspaper columns. Young patrons were given special attention with regular story time programs. Finances were stable, and readership was steadily climbing.

In January 1946, Mrs. Matsen, having splendidly completed her assignment, asked the board to name her replacement from the stack of graduate librarians' applications they had received.

A month later, Irene Griffith arrived from Montana to take the job. Miss Griffith, who served as city librarian for 25 years, brought total dedication to her new position. Under her direction, and with the help of two assistants, the library continued to grow. Within a year after opening, hours had been extended to Monday through Saturday from noon till 9 p.m. There were 911 registered cardholders, and over 21,100 books were borrowed in the 12-month period; figures would have been higher, but the threat of a diphtheria epidemic forced the library to close for two weeks during August.

Space was always a major consideration. More books meant more shelves, and patrons couldn't always find a place to sit. As time went on, it was evident that the "temporary" building really needed to be replaced by a larger and more permanent facility. But it would be nearly ten years before the dream came true, and then through the generosity of a Russian immigrant.

Zachary Joshua Loussac, 1904 graduate of the New York College of Pharmacy, had moved to Anchorage in 1916. He founded a thriving drugstore business; his sales slips carried the motto, "The store that has what you want, when you want it." Quietly, from the

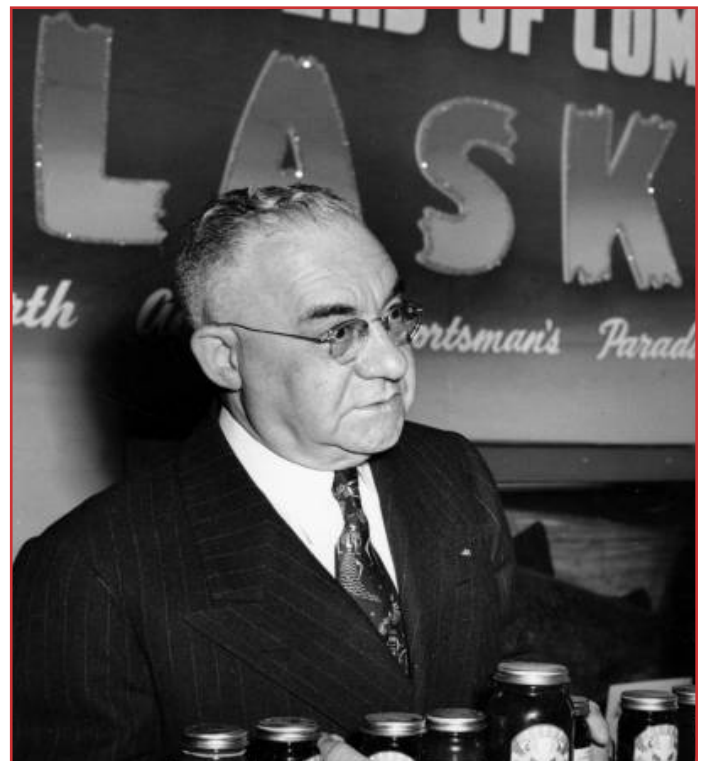
sidelines, he observed what his adopted hometown wanted and needed.

In 1946, Mr. Loussac created a foundation to support local cultural, recreational and educational facilities. "The people of Anchorage have been good to me," he said. "Everything that I earned came from here, and I want it used here."

Mr. Loussac was popular, as evidenced by his election to the office of mayor three times in a row. The last of the one-year-term mayors, he served from April 1948 until October 1951. Even as he left office, the Loussac Foundation began to plan a truly spectacular project.

For the very first time, Anchorage was going to get a library especially designed and built for that purpose - not space in another building, not a renovated surplus structure, but a brand-new, modern public library with room to grow.

Such a magnificent project took time, and the Cow Palace continued its busy existence. But slowly the dream



Z.J. Loussac. *Photo courtesy of Alaska's Digital Archives.*

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took shape, and the local firm of Manley & Mayer was awarded the contract for the design. Interestingly, Mr. Manley had drawn the plans for the famous Rotarian house raffled off in 1945 to benefit the library. In August 1953, the City Council approved both the final blueprints and the official name for the building: the Z.J. Loussac Public Library. The next April, as a large crowd looked on, Mr. Loussac turned the first shovelful of dirt at groundbreaking ceremonies. His comment on this auspicious occasion was, "Now the time has come for us to do work instead of talking."

Wiggins Construction Company, sidewalk-supervised by an intensely interested public, brought the architects' plans to life at 427 F Street. Compared with previous library incarnations, the building was huge - 6,000 square feet on the main floor, an equal-size basement, and 2,300 square feet on the mezzanine. The walls were reinforced concrete and steel, well able to withstand even the Good Friday earthquake in 1964.

The flooring was asphalt tile, the ceiling acoustical tile. Birch paneling along the balcony was complemented by light-wood furniture and beige fiberglass draperies for the enormous windows that spanned the front of the building. Chairs upholstered in yellow, green and persimmon provided color accents. There was ample space on the steel shelving for 100,000 volumes - the Cow Palace had boasted a collection of 18,000.

The library had separate adult and children's reading rooms, a spacious work area for Miss Griffith and her staff of five, a basement conference room, several restrooms, and half a dozen small lockers for storage of shopping bags as library users browsed.

Festivities preceding the February 23, 1955 opening drew over 1,100 residents eager to see the new \$350,000 facility. They were not disappointed, though there was a lot of open space and far too few books to fill the shelves. This was, after all, a library designed to last for decades. Growth was expected.

Z.J. Loussac Public Library was formally dedicated on June 1, 1955, a ceremony the Anchorage Daily News called "a significant milestone in the modern development of Alaska." The printed program's cover featured the New Testament verse engraved in large letters along the 5th Avenue side of the library: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

Though this interpretation may not have been quite what the apostle John had in mind when he recorded the words of Jesus, the quote was a fitting comment on the principal purpose of a library. Soon there were over 2800 library cards in constant use, and the average daily circulation was close to 500. A small historical and wildlife museum on the mezzanine attracted residents and visitors, and traffic was heavy during all open hours.



Z.J. Loussac Public. *Photo courtesy of The Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center ww236-1.*

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Central Junior High School, across the intersection, sent English classes over for Miss Griffith to instruct them in proper use of the new facility. Students at the new Anchorage High School (also designed by Manley & Mayer and dedicated in 1955) found the library an excellent place to meet friends as well as work on assignments.

Miss Griffith's personal aspiration of establishing a top-notch Alaskan section was given a boost when the family of Warren N. Cuddy, a pioneer banker, presented his collection of books to the library. Other donations in memory of Mr. Cuddy followed. From that base, the Alaska Collection has grown to 25,000 volumes today, and the First National Bank of Anchorage Employees Club continues to donate funds for new books in memory of Mr. Cuddy's wife, Lucy.

Patrons appreciated the wide variety of titles available, as the shelves filled and the mezzanine museum was displaced by books. Telephone directories from Alaskan and Outside cities were popular, magazines and newspapers even more so. Every annual report noted increased circulation, and open space began to disappear.

Only seven years after the grand opening, Zach Loussac had remarked, "I hope I live long enough to see an addition built." But he died in Seattle in March 1965, at the age of 82. The library, in tribute to its benefactor, closed for three hours during his funeral service.

1965 was a busy year. Anchorage, thrust into headlines with the 1964 earthquake and the hint of oil riches, was booming. And, suddenly, so were libraries. Irene Griffith, recently wed to Roy Samson, announced that "the present library facilities have been outgrown," but the staff managed to cope well.

Mrs. Samson's final years as city librarian were crammed with a flurry of activity before her 1971 retirement to Seattle. Summer bookmobile service began in 1965, using a rehabilitated surplus military vehicle. The bookmobile visited Government Hill, Wonder Park and Sand Lake. Later it extended its route to the Seward Highway area, making stops at the Edgewater Motel, Mile 8, the Hilltop Youth Club and the Pacific Auction Barn. The bookmobile was discontinued in 1971 due to its small capacity. It provided only slight relief to book needs and only during good driving months in the summer.

The Spenard Library, created in 1960 with the sponsorship of the local Social & Civic Club, moved under supervision of the Greater Anchorage Area Borough in 1965. At the same time, libraries opened in both Girdwood and Eagle River. The Chugiak Library, long inactive after its founding by the Chugiak Ladies Club, reopened.

In 1967, Loussac acquired its first official city branch library, as Grandview Gardens opened in the remodeled Telephone Utility building on Primrose Street. The



Irene Griffith (Samson), far right. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center.*



Anchorage Garden Club donates books, 1968. *Photo courtesy of Anchorage Garden Club records, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.*

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following year Chugiak and Eagle River Libraries, merging into one operation, transferred to city management. In 1969, Spenard Library followed suit.

In 1973 Mountain View Branch Library, begun in the early 70's as a tiny collection in the recreation center, expanded and moved to a new building at Mountain View Drive and Bragaw Street. The same year, Sand Lake Branch opened on Jewel Lake Road. Two years later, with borough/city unification, the Spenard and Chugiak-Eagle River libraries became official branches in the Anchorage Municipal Libraries system. In 1977, Hillside area residents welcomed the Samson Dimond Branch, named to honor Irene Griffith Samson, in Dimond Center.

By 1979, city librarians Betty Lou Townley and Dorothy Shaver had come and gone, Keith Revelle was in the director's chair, and Loussac was crowded beyond comprehension. The children's section repeatedly grew smaller, as adult books and sound recordings demanded more room. Staff areas were unbearably tight, crowded with overlapping desks. The conference room and storage area in the basement were long gone, given over to staff work space. What had been a wonderful new building in 1955 was now nearly unusable, particularly with the age of technology looming.

Between 1974 and 1981 library bond issues, part of Project 80's, were introduced to Anchorage voters and passed by respectable margins. Joined with a state grant, the total of \$43 million ensured construction of a major library to serve all of Southcentral Alaska.

In 1981, Loussac Library moved to inadequate, but temporary, quarters at 524 West 6th Avenue, a location that would serve as the Downtown Branch after the new headquarters library opened. The F Street building that had been so proudly given to Anchorage, and so gratefully received, went down to demolition explosives, its site reserved for another Project 80's component - the Egan Convention Center.

Over on 6th Avenue, there was more space for staff, since the building had a rabbit warren of small rooms on the second floor, but patrons jostled each other in the narrow aisles and often filled every available chair. The

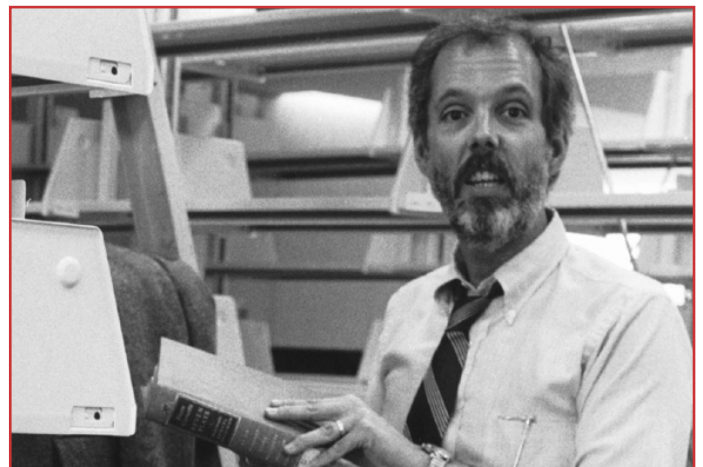
headquarters library couldn't come soon enough.

Diverting some attention from the big project, Muldoon Branch opened in 1984 and integrated into Anchorage's heavily-used network of libraries. Computers were installed and the library system went on-line. The card catalog quickly became a thing of the past.

Planning and construction of the new Headquarters facility, designed by Environmental Concern, Inc. of Spokane, proceeded on schedule. Technical Services staff, relocated to Grandview Gardens in 1981, processed hundreds of new books well in advance of the opening, and stored them on basement shelves. Top priority was given to Headquarters tasks.

The Library Advisory Board, chaired by Wilda Marston, labored faithfully with citizen committees to help make the Midtown facility a reality. Under the guidance of Municipal Librarian Keith Revelle and Project Manager Janice M. Ridgeway, the new Z.J. Loussac Public Library rose in splendor at 3600 Denali Street, on the old Morris and Mildred Birchfield homestead. A portion of the homestead was purchased by Arne Link in 1961. According to Mr. Link, Kelly Foss also bought acreage from the Birchfields. 17.5 acres of this land was obtained by the city and now comprises the library grounds.

As the Loussac Library capital campaign progressed, it became apparent that public support alone would not be enough to complete the building. To finish the campaign



Keith Revelle. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*

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and create a long-term support system, Wilda Marston gathered fellow library supporters, Eric Wohlforth, Wilda Hudson, Arne Espy and Arliss Sturgulewski, to create the first Anchorage Library Foundation. The organization incorporated in 1982 and continues to conduct long-term planning and capital support for the Library.

Additionally, in 1986 the Friends of the Library was formed to raised funds to purchase books to complete the new collection at the Loussac Library. Both groups still exist today and work together to help the library grow and thrive.

The Z.J. Loussac Public Library grand opening was on September 14, 1986, but there was so much to offer that the celebration went on for a week (in fact, the celebration continued through the following year when Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor visited for the one year anniversary). Author John Barth and poet John Haines were but two of the dignitaries who took part. Of far more interest to the youngest library patrons were the Saturday programs starring Mr. McFeeley and Purple Panda from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Response was so great a third program had to be added at the last minute.

The community finally had the library it deserved. The new library covered 140,000 square feet, spread over four levels. Patrons that first week were impressed by everything from the abundant artwork to the terrazzo

floor around the circulation desk. Other popular areas of the new building included a media section that featured videotapes and the Friends of the Library gift shop, plus books, books and more books everywhere! The Wilda Marston Theatre, named to credit the Library Board chairwoman who had been instrumental in securing private funding for its 232 seats, drew admiring comments.

Particular attention was paid to the Alaska Collection, set in its own 3-story wing and accessible through the Galleria, past the Ann Stevens Room - so designated in tribute to the late wife of Senator Ted Stevens, and furnished solely by private donations. A quiet reading area with Oriental rugs, a fireplace, leather chairs and large windows, it presented an elegant atmosphere.

Twenty-five years later, the Loussac Library is still heavily used, both inside and out. In winter, trees on the park-like grounds sparkle with white lights. In summer, patrons gather around the bronze statue of William Seward to enjoy concerts on the plaza. One focal point outdoors is the ice fountain, designed by Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar to accommodate the seasons. It's somewhat startling to realize that the fountain's \$325,000 price tag nearly equalled the \$350,000 cost of the 1955 Loussac Library.

The reality of Anchorage's economic recession hit home as the decade drew to an end, and in December 1988 Grandview Gardens, Mountain View, Sand Lake and



Wilda Marston. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*



Moe McGee. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*

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Downtown branches closed. There were changes in library directors as well. Mr. Revelle, having proficiently seen Headquarters through all the stages from early plans to grand opening and beyond, was succeeded by Faye Alexiev in 1988 and then by Anne Oliphant, who capably served from 1989 until her retirement in 1992.

Mary H. (Moe) McGee took the helm that summer and continued as Municipal Librarian until 2003. Under her oversight, the Samson Dimond Branch shifted to a new spot in Dimond Center and the Muldoon Branch moved to Boniface Center at the corner of Boniface and Northern Lights. The Girdwood library, renamed the Scott & Wesley Gerrish Branch in memory of two young brothers, was relocated to one end of the elementary school. Mountain View Branch, after much citizen lobbying, reopened in an experimental sharing of space with Clark Middle School in 1994.

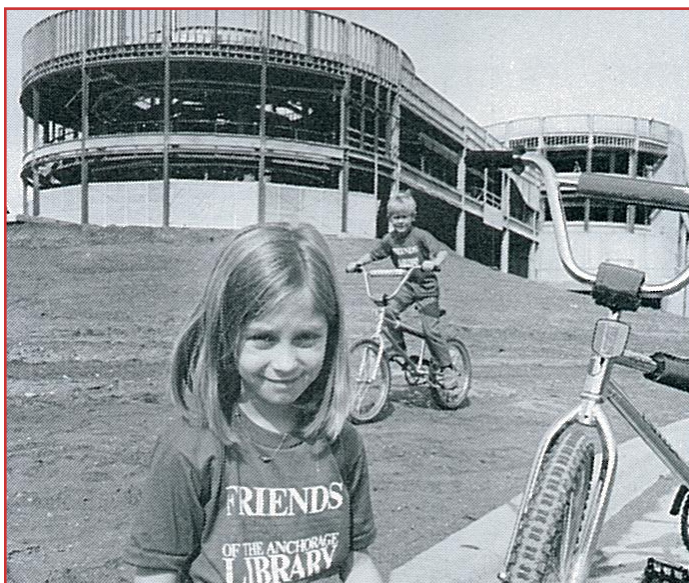
In 1995, Anchorage Municipal Libraries checked out 1,304,968 items to 924,154 patrons. Its meeting rooms were booked 3,301 times. 765 children's programs drew more than 28,000 youngsters. Except for Sunday closures in summer, Loussac Library was open seven days a week, and the branches open five. Total library staff numbered over 130.

In April 1996, a new computer catalog system was installed, called DRA after the company that produced it (Digital Research Associates). The old Geac system, considered a modern miracle in 1985, had long been outdated and was rapidly deteriorating. Its state-of-the-art replacement marked another step into the electronic information age.

By 1998, the Alaska Resources Library and Information Services (ARLIS) outgrew their lending system and approached the Library about becoming a partner and sharing the DRA system. They were soon followed by the UAA/APU Consortium Library, UAA's extended campus libraries (Mat-Su, Kenai, Homer, Kodiak, and Valdez) and the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. DRA was later bought out by Sirsi who retired the DRA system in 2006. SirsiDynix continues to be one of the largest providers of integrated library systems in the world.

The shared catalog between the major libraries is unique partnership that benefits Anchorage patrons greatly by providing access to materials across south central Alaska.

In the fall of 2003, amid a deficit and Municipal budget cuts, under Director Art Weeks, the Library's budget for



Kids play in front of the new Library. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*



Card catalog and computers. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*

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2004 was reduced by \$1,000,000, resulting in a loss of 23 staff positions (almost 20%) system-wide. Public service hours and locations remained the same, but the number of programs/events for the public were diminished and there were longer waits for service and materials.

The Library slowly began to recover from the cuts and in 2006, during the 20th anniversary celebration for the Loussac Library, Mayor Mark Begich joined longtime library advocates and newly appointed Library Director Karen Keller to launch the Anchorage Library Renewal Initiative. The city-wide effort to revitalize the Library focused on improving operations, increasing community outreach and renovating facilities. The Muldoon and Girdwood Libraries were the first projects. The Initiative brought about a new logo (a colorful arc in the shape of an open book), a new name (Anchorage Public Library from Anchorage Municipal Libraries), and increased PR around the importance of the library in our community.

The Library commissioned an economic valuation from University of Alaska Anchorage's Institute of Social and Economic Research. "Growing Minds and Strengthening Communities: An economic valuation study of the Anchorage Public Library" was published in 2008 and found that APL generated a community benefit between \$10-\$18 million annually. For every \$1 in municipal support for libraries, they returned up to \$2.46 in benefits to the community.

The Renewal Initiative capital campaign included technology and building upgrades to all neighborhood libraries and the main Z.J. Loussac Public Library, as well as the creation of a new location downtown. In 2007, all libraries became Wi-Fi hotspots and the Muldoon Neighborhood Library moved into a new facility, shared with the Boys and Girls Club.

In May 2008, a brand new 9,000 square-foot library and community room in Girdwood replaced the 1,200 sq. ft. facility in the corner of the elementary school. The new Chugiak-Eagle River Neighborhood Library opened in the Eagle River Town Center in August 2009. The 18,000 sq. ft. library is the centerpiece of the new town center which houses other Municipal departments, such as the Eagle River offices of Parks and Recreation and Health and Human Services.

The final project of the first phase of the Initiative was the opening of the Mountain View Neighborhood Library in September 2010. The Library reclaimed the building it had given up to budget cuts in 1988, renovated it and added a community room. The building was certified as LEED Gold by the U.S. Green Building Council, one of the highest levels attainable for green building design. In recognition of this achievement, the library was featured in several categories in the American Library Association's 2011 Library Design Showcase.

The renovations were made possible through state and federal grants, a municipal bond and generous investments from individuals, businesses and foundations. The Library and its supporters raised over \$14 million between 2006-2010. Lead funders included the Gottstein and Crews families, the Atwood, Rasmuson, and Chugiak-Eagle River Foundations, the State of Alaska, BP, the Denali Commission and Municipal Light and Power. The voters passed a library bond for \$2.9M in 2008 for renovations at Loussac, Mountain View and Chugiak-Eagle River. Girdwood voters also passed a \$1M levy on their service district to support the Girdwood Library renovation.

As the first phase of upgrades neared completion, Library supporters decided to create a long-term plan to help guide APL and its partner groups in their work, ensure that the library responded to community needs, and provide organizational stability over time. The planning process challenged the community to imagine



Mayor Mark Begich and Karen Keller at the picnic for the 20th Anniversary of the Z.J. Loussac Library.

Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.

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a world-class, 21st century public library and over 6,000 residents helped shape a community-supported plan to turn this vision into reality.

The Library Community Plan was released in December 2009 as the Library was experiencing record-high usage and crippling budget cuts due to the recession of 2007. The findings were unsettling—the public library was in a struggle for survival and if left unchecked, the downward funding trends would lead to a library system that was at best mediocre and at worst irrelevant.

The Library Plan also offered recommendations on how to move APL beyond survival mode, into a thriving public library.



Library staff, 2006. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*

Five focus areas from Library Community Plan:

- Create a more welcoming, community-centered library
- Encourage a new generation of library users while engaging traditional users
- Enhance customer service
- Let people know what the library offers
- Reduce operating costs and secure new sources of funding

The Plan inspired Library Director Karen Keller and Youth Services Coordinator Sherri Douglas to pursue their vision to meet the goal of encouraging a new generation of library users by creating a teen center at the Z.J. Loussac Library. They pitched their idea to Anchorage Rotary Club president Cheryl Myers in May of 2010. Cheryl appointed Carol Butler to lead a team of Rotarians to organize the project. In less than a year, Carol and her team raised \$200,000 and opened Teen Underground on June 10, 2011. The high-tech, vibrant space includes a Smart Board, iPads, a MacBook learning lab and new teen books. Once again, the Rotarians had come through for the Library.

Unfortunately, the Library's pattern of major success followed by budget cuts has continued. Despite the widespread community investment and growth of the system, the library was not shielded from massive city budget cuts between 2008 and 2011. In 2009, fourteen positions were eliminated and in December 2010, the Samson-Diamond Library was closed after thirty-three years of service. However, the Library keeps plugging along like the Little Engine that Could and continues to follow the recommendations of the Library Community Plan and move forward on phase two of the Library Renewal Initiative, a major renewal of the Z.J. Loussac Library and the creation of a downtown library (and now re-establishing a South Anchorage Library).

Despite the cuts, the Library continues to grow and now serves more patrons than ever. Today's bustling Anchorage Public Library circulates over 1.6 million materials a year. The main Z.J. Loussac Library and its four neighborhood libraries serve over 870,000 visitors each year, which exceeds total attendance at the Sullivan Arena by more than 74%. Over 180,000 residents (60%) have library cards, and over 60,000 children and adults participate in programs each year.

ANCHORAGE PUBLIC LIBRARY HISTORY, 1917-2011



Gerrish Girdwood Library boosters outside of the newly opened library, 2008. *Photo courtesy of the Eric Teela.*

In 2011, as the Z.J. Loussac Library celebrates its 25th Anniversary, the Library will embark upon a once-in-a-generation renewal of the vital and beloved Anchorage institution. The renewal is a large, multi-year project that will be completed in phases. A facility master plan will begin in the early 2012 and will set the scope of the renovation. Improvements expected include a redesigned entrance that creates a public commons and a south-facing gathering space for community events. Inside, visitors will find a new lobby, an expanded teen center, information commons, upgraded children's area, high-tech Wilda Marston Theatre and revitalized Ann Stevens Reading Room.

Anchorage readers had a vision in 1917. That vision has expanded far beyond anything they could have imagined. The tiny subscription library has evolved into a free public library system that offers sophisticated services from interlibrary loan to Internet access, yet still depends heavily on volunteers, donations and community support.

And that, surely, is as it should be.



Muldoon Library, 2009. *Photo courtesy of Kelly DuFort.*



Mountain View Library, 2010. *Photo courtesy of the Anchorage Public Library Archives.*

