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### A SHORT HISTORY OF PIERCE COUNTY LIBRARY: 1946 - 1965

The passage of time and numerous staff changes in the interim make it more and more difficult to remember the early days of Pierce County Library. This short profile of the "making of a library" is intended to give new employees some frame of reference upon which they can build their knowledge of how the system works.

In 1941 the state legislature passed the present basic library law as it applies to county or regional (multi-county) libraries. Under this law each county may vote to tax itself in order to provide library service to its residents. The money provided by this self-taxation provides a central headquarters library, which in turn provides books and other materials, supplies and necessary personnel to serve unincorporated areas of the county. Incorporated towns may contract for service on the same 2 mill basis paid by residents of the unincorporated areas.

On November 7, 1944, the residents of Pierce County voted on and passed a ballot measure which asked "Shall a rural county library district be established in Pierce County outside the incorporated limits of all incorporated cities and towns?" On June 1, 1945, the county commissioners appointed a board of trustees, with terms of from one to five years, to administer the library district. Mrs. Marion L. Cromwell was appointed librarian, with Miss Margaret Bixby as assistant in charge of work with children. Miss Thelma Bloom (now Mrs. Thelma Perry) was hired as their clerical assistant. They began work on January 2, 1946 in a dimly lighted room in Tacoma Public Library's old Carnegie building. Some weeks later, around February 15, they moved to an old store building at 502 South 11th Street and with nothing but "a pencil and a sheet of paper," they were on their own. In the early days they often brought pails of water, mops and brooms and did their own janitor work.

A contract was negotiated between the fledgling library and Tacoma Public Library which allowed county borrowers to use the books and facilities of the established library.

Stations were opened in various communities in 1946. The first was Gig Harbor on May 1, 1946, and this was followed in rapid succession by American Lake Gardens, Longbranch and National. Milton was the first incorporated town to contract with the library district for service, which began on August 19, 1946. Parkland and Vaughn completed the list of those stations opened during the first year.

More stations were added to the young library system in 1947. In February Anderson Island and Lakewood stations were opened. They were followed by Lacamas, Tillicum and Home-Lakebay in the same year. All over the county people were planning ways to support a building or a room in a community hall so that they could have library service. The demand threatened to outstrip the supply of books, which was increasing as rapidly as orders could be placed. And still other communities wished to avail themselves of library service. Stations were opened at Steilacoom, Roy, Weyerhaeuser and Purdy during the summer and fall of 1947.

The first Pierce County Library bookmobile was put into service in September 1947. Some seventy communities and twenty-eight schools were served on a schedule of 10 routes which were covered every two weeks. Bob Aitken, who was hired to drive the first bookmobile, still drives for Pierce County Library.

In 1948, library stations sprouted at Dash Point and Wilkeson in addition to the unusual one at the ranger station at Longmire, amid the tall evergreens of Rainier National Park.

In 1949, Dr. Charles Bowerman of the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington made a survey of the state's existing library facilities. He felt that if these were organized into regional and multi-county units, they would provide better service for the entire state. He suggested twelve regions on the basis of sufficient population and potential library income. These regional units would be of various types. One would be the joining together of all the city, town and county libraries of a region into one financial and administrative unit. Another region would have the libraries providing reciprocal services for each other, the larger ones loaning books to the smaller ones, as an example. For the more populated counties (such as Pierce County) there could be a one-county unit of all the libraries into a single county library district. A number of city and county librarians and library boards began to consider this plan. In July of 1949, the boards of trustees of Pierce County Library and Tacoma Public Library met jointly to consider whether or not the proposed new Tacoma Public Library building (for which a bond issue already had been passed) would have enough space to permit joint use. It was decided that a merger of the two library systems was not feasible at that time and that Tacoma Public Library would require all the space available in the new building. Pierce County Library headquarters remained in its rented quarters at 502 South 11th Street.

Several changes and improvements took place during 1949. The Lakewood community library was moved into the Sunshine Gift Shop and the Dash Point one move into the Dash Point Grocery. New shelves were added at Steilacoom and Weyerhaeuser, and Steilacoom and Wilkeson libraries were repainted.

Parkland's Community Club library committee started a campaign to raise money for a building in 1950, and in December the committee bought a quonset hut to be used as a library building. The Library at American Lake Gardens was closed in September of that year due to changes in population and needs of military families, who had been the heaviest users of the library. Brown's Point, Gig Harbor, Lacamas and Longmire all were redecorated, and the Lacamas library had new linoleum installed.

In 1951 a building on the grounds of the Midland School was opened as a library to serve the residents of the Midland area. The Parkland Library was moved into its quonset hut and reopened for service on August 8, 1951. Other changes during the year included additional shelves for the Roy and Wilkeson libraries and a new bookcase for the Lakewood library, a gift of the Kiwanis Club.

The highlight of 1952 was the addition of a second bookmobile. Bill Caster, who was hired as driver, is still with Pierce County Library. Many small changes in the community libraries included better heating and more shelves. The Steilacoom Bridge Club bought new tables and chairs during the year, which were to be used in the library. A major overhaul took place at Vaughn where new shelves were added, the heating and lighting systems were changed, and the library received a coat of paint and fresh wall paper.

Steilacoom library exhibited a collection of pioneer trophies and an unusual display of state and local histories during the Centennial year celebration in 1953. The town has the distinction of having had the first library collection in the state. Another notable event of 1953 was the opening of the Orting library in the Town Hall as a branch of Pierce County Library. The town had had a library some years before, but had voted to contract for service from Pierce County Library. The roof at Anderson Island library was reshingled and a new furnace was installed. During the year, Parkland library was improved by the addition of a new stove, shelves, roof repairs, and flowers were planted in front of the quonset hut.

Lakewood branch's floor was repainted in 1954 and it added three standing book shelves. Parkland branch was repainted inside and out. The Wilkeson city council bought the library assistant a new desk that year. Steilacoom celebrated its centennial anniversary as the first incorporated town in Washington territory. The library displayed an exhibit with a covered wagon and books on the early days of the town.

In 1955, Brown's Point branch moved into the Brown's Point Club House, where it would share the attractive facilities with community activities. The Lakewood branch was closed due to the lack of a proper building and the books were brought into headquarters. On March 15, 1955, McNeil Island opened its branch in the new Club House to serve the employees of the federal prison. The town of Roy presented some new shelves to their library. Steilacoom's library received new shelves from the town and they were painted to match the existing shelves. Tillicum branch moved into a refurnished cabin.

The club house which housed the Anderson Island branch was repainted in 1956 and its steps were repaired. Lacamas branch moved from a room in the school into a room in the Community Hall in 1956. Lakewood branch reopened in April, 1957, in a rented building on Bridgeport way. The interior of the Roy branch was repainted and three chairs were donated for public use. A book drop and retaining box was added to the Steilacoom library from the Town Council. Weyerhaeuser branch moved into its own room which had been the school office, from its area in the school lunch room.

In June 1957, Tacoma Public Library and Pierce County Public Library decided to terminate their contract in which the county residents could use the books and facilities, because they were unable to agree on the price to be paid for this service. On January 1, 1957, Eatonville proudly opened its new branch library in the Hotes Masonic Temple in a refurnished attractive room. In May 1957, the Vaughn Library was moved into new modern quarters at the Key Peninsula Civic Center. Lakewood branch acquired new furniture and equipment. Midland's exterior was repainted. Purdy's exterior was also repainted; it acquired new shelves, new curtains and chair covers.

Steilacoom library celebrated its library centennial on February 3, 1958. In 1858, the territorial legislature passed the act authorizing the incorporation of the Steilacoom Library Association. This was the first library in the state. Tillicum branch moved into a room at the Tillicum Elementary School, which had added to it more shelves.

In 1958, National branch, located in a lumber town, was closed because of the dwindling population. The town of Milton, which had its branch in the town hall, decided to terminate its contract with the Pierce County system. The roof was fixed and an oil heater installed at Gig Harbor branch. On December 6, 1958, Lakewood branch moved into a small, dark room at the Park Lodge School. In December, 1958, headquarters moved from the store building of 11th and Fawcett into 201 St. Helens Avenue. They closed for a week for the move and with careful planning and the advice of professional movers it was accomplished. Parkland Jaycee's had made some new shelves and a book cart for their library. Ladies from the Roy P.T.A. painted the shelves and floor, and more shelves and new floor runners were laid.

In 1959, on June 1, the Lakes District Improvement Council, sponsors of the library, began a drive to raise funds for a new library building for the lakewood branch.

The Orting branch was closed for two weeks in October, while new shelves, paint and other redecorations were added. The Pierce County jail branch quarters were moved into better lighted ones, which seemed to help increase the circulation. Weyerhaeuser's branch moved from a room in the Weyerhaeuser School into the Weyerhaeuser Clubhouse where there were more shelves and table space. Wilkeson branch added extra shelves and some redecoration to improve its services.

In 1960, Longbranch branch, which shares a section of a building, received a little more space due to the closing of the business in the other part of the building. Dash Point library moved from the grocery store into the Fireplace room of the Dash Point Community House. Again the citizens of Eatonville voted enthusiastically for the financial support necessary to pay for the building and upkeep of their library. Orting added new shelves, which were promptly filled with books. A Collier's Encyclopedia 1960 edition set and a two drawer metal filing cabinet were donated to the Tillicum Branch.

On March 29, 1961, the Lakes District Improvement Council received a pledge from the Tenzler Foundation. The Foundation pledged funds for the site at Gravelly Lake Drive and Wildaire Road, the building, parking lot, landscaping, fixtures, and furnishings. The people of Lakewood were to support the upkeep of the building, for which the Friends of the Lakes District Library continued to raise funds. In Gig Harbor, in July 1961, with the approval of the town council, a library board was established and a campaign began to raise funds for the erection of a new library building. Land for a library building was donated to the town. New shelves were installed in Home-Lakebay branch. Longmire was redecorated with a new tile floor, brown, orange and tan curtains and bookdrop. The squirrels were halted in their cavorting among the rafters and shingles on the roof of the Purdy branch, due to efforts of the Idaka Club and husbands who put on a new roof. Anderson Island branch received the benefit of modern civilization - electricity in 1961. It also aided culture a bit by displaying the works of several artists who live on the island.

Various improvements were made at Midland, Parkland, Key-Peninsula and Gig Harbor libraries during 1962. Both the circulation of materials and the number of materials available continued to grow, and the requests for special materials were growing apace.

University Place, which was formerly a bookmobile area, opened its own library in August, 1963, under the sponsorship of the University Place Boosters. The site chosen is in a shopping area known as the Prestige Center which is a drawing point for the library. In July of that year, Gig Harbor opened its new library for service. Justifiably proud of their handiwork, the citizens of Gig Harbor responded to their new building by borrowing over 10,000 books more than they had the year before.

The former Lakewood branch reopened as the Flora B. Tenzler Memorial Library on August 1, 1963 in the award-winning building designed by Russell Garrison of Lakewood. In an overwhelming vote of approval, Lakewood borrowers swarmed into the library to borrow a total of 74,763 books during the year. Other library improvements were made during the year at Home-Lakebay, Parkland, and Steilacoom.

In March 1964, a consultant from the Washington State Library completed a survey of the Buckley Public Library. The library dated back to 1903 and had operated as an independent municipal library. It was recommended by the survey that Buckley contract for service with the Pierce County Library system to improve its services.

The measure was put on the ballot in the general election and passed by a large majority, paving the way for Buckley's contract with Pierce County Library to begin in January 1965. Other events of the year included structural improvements at Lacamas, Steilacoom and Purdy libraries. Parkland and Eatonville both made major changes in their interior furnishings.

A front page article in the Suburban Times newspaper in October, 1964, started a chain reaction which was to keep the library in the spotlight for the rest of the year and most of 1965. The newspaper questioned the purpose of a large cash surplus in library funds which had not been specifically earmarked. The library board, at its next meeting, designated the fund as being set aside to build a permanent headquarters for the library. Controversy raged as groups from Gig Harbor and University Place requested that the money be spent for books and services rather than a new headquarters building. At this point, the library board felt that a survey by impartial consultants could best pinpoint the library's most urgent needs, and the State Library was requested to find qualified consultants. Mr. John Richards and Mrs. Gretchen Schenk agreed to conduct the survey in the summer of 1965.

In April of 1965, Mrs. Marion L. Cromwell tendered her resignation, but agreed to remain in her position until December if a replacement had not been found before that time. Mrs. Floyd (Carolyn) Else, who had been the Tenzler librarian for several years, was hired as Interim Acting Librarian (a title which later was changed to Interim Library Director) and assumed her new duties on September 15, 1965.

The survey report was published in November 1965. In brief, it proposed the eventual consolidation of all the public libraries in Pierce County. It also recommended beginning this consolidation with the immediate consideration of a joint processing center which would handle book orders, cataloging and processing of materials for the five independent libraries of Pierce County: Tacoma Public Library, Puyallup Public Library, Pierce County Library, Sumner Public Library and Milton Public Library. As the year drew to a close, joint meetings of the directors and boards of these libraries were scheduled to discuss the problems which would be involved in setting up this processing center. Other recommendations of the survey were that Pierce County Library hire a larger staff of professional librarians and build up its book collection in order to provide better service to county residents. By the end of the year, many of the recommendations of the survey were being acted upon as rapidly as possible. The future lies ahead.