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A History of the Kearney Public Library & Information Center: the First Century 1890-1990

Ron Norman

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A History of the

Kearney Public Library & Information Center:

the First Century
1890-1990

by
Ron Norman



Spec Z 733 .K43 N6

Norman, Ron.

A History of the Kearney
Public Library & ...

Public Library and Information Center

Centennial Celebration Dinner

Sunday, October 28, 1990

Welcome
DeWayne Wolf

Invocation
Rev. Richard Turner
Chairman, Library Board

Dinner

Introductions
DeWayne Wolf

Bequest to Kearney Public Library Foundation
William J. Ross

Acceptance of Bequest
Rev. Richard Turner
Chairman, Library Foundation

Kearney Public Library Foundation
Jackie Rosenlof

Introduction of Speaker
Ron Norman
Library Director

"Books That Have Completely Altered My Mind"
Dr. John Janovy, Jr.

Closing
DeWayne Wolf

Social hour music performed by
KSC String Ensemble
Dr. John Brawand

A History of the
**Kearney Public Library
& Information Center:**

the First Century
1890-1990

by
Ron Norman

**CALVIN T. RYAN LIBRARY
KEARNEY STATE COLLEGE
KEARNEY, NEBRASKA**

Morris Press, Kearney

1990



INTRODUCTION

Although the Kearney Public Library and Information Center did not come into being until September 1, 1890, the desire of the citizens for a public library was present almost from the founding of the community in 1873.

Imagine Kearney in its early years. It was established only decades after the start of the great westward migration. This area of the country in the minds of many people was part of what earlier had been described as the Great American Desert. In its early years Kearney was a real frontier town.

Those who settled here had come from both the eastern part of the country and from countries across the Atlantic. They wanted Kearney to be civilized as quickly as possible. They wanted to quickly establish those services and institutions they had known.

It is understandable, then, that almost from the beginning of its history the people of Kearney wanted a library. First, there was a Library Association, then a Reading Club, then a Reading Room, next a private collection of books called the Kearney Library, and finally in 1890 the Kearney Public Library.

The Kearney Public Library and Information Center has developed as Kearney has developed. This year, 1990, the one hundredth year of library service to the community, finds Kearney the fifth largest city in Nebraska. The community is energetic, dynamic, and continuing to grow.

The same can be said for the Kearney Public Library and Information Center. Because of the vision of its citizens, Kearney has one of the finest public library buildings in the state. The use of the library and its resources continues to increase year after year so that the library's annual circulation is among the highest of all of the public libraries in the state.

Truly, the Kearney Public Library and Information Center is one of Kearney's greatest resources and it has benefited innumerable people over the last ten decades. Its commission has been from the beginning and continues to be to serve all of the citizens of the community. The Library Board of Trustees and the library's trained and dedicated staff take this commission seriously.

There is every indication that Kearney will continue to grow and to develop into one of Nebraska's most vital cities. The Kearney Public Library and Information Center will not only be part of this growth and development but, through its materials and services, will contribute to it.

We look back at one hundred years of library service to the community and take pride in the library's many benefits to the community. We now move into a second century with the strong conviction that the library's service to the community will not only continue but will grow and be of even more importance to the community.

Dr. Richard D. Turner, President
 Board of Trustees
 Kearney Public Library and Information Center
 October, 1990

Three Views from the Same Angle

1917



1972

1975



THE BEGINNING

With a collection of books purchased from William Skinner, News Editor of the Kearney Hub, the Kearney Public Library began operations on September 1, 1890.

Located in the City Hall Council Room, the library was open 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Sunday and 7:00 to 10:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Materials could be checked out and returned Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.

It was two years earlier that Mr. Skinner had travelled east and had purchased about 1,000 books. He then had opened what was called the Kearney Library on the corner of 25th Street and First Avenue in 1889. Yearly subscriptions were \$4.00 for a single person and \$5.00 for a family. Many citizens, however, felt that the community needed a public rather than a private library. This sentiment ultimately led to the city's purchase of Mr. Skinner's collection.

The desire to have a library was quite strong from the beginning of Kearney's history. In 1876, three years after the city was incorporated, a Library Association was formed and L. R. More, the owner and founder of Kearney's first bank, was elected president of the group. The next year a Reading Club was organized with the goal of establishing a library in the community. In 1880, the newly organized Woman's Christian Temperance Union took as one of its first projects the establishment of a Reading Room. By June, 1881, after obtaining enough subscriptions, a Reading Room was opened on the corner lot of Tenth Street known as Mr. Grable's corner. Life memberships cost \$5.00 and transient members were required to deposit \$1.00. There was a 5 cent charge for each book and magazine checked out.

The 1880's and early 1890's were a boom period for Kearney. This was a time of rapid growth, wild speculation, and inflated values. The Kearney Canal was dug. Among the many businesses that started in Kearney during this period were a cotton mill, a paper mill, a woolen mill, an oatmeal mill, plow factory, cracker factory, pressed brick works, machine shops, a packinghouse, and an electric street railway which ran cars from the courthouse to East Lawn on the east to the lake on the west. The lake was a gathering area for recreational activities. Scattered along the lakefront were a pavillion, bathhouses, a steam launch and various amusement places. The Opera House was also built during this period.



Lottie Gove Norton

At the height of the boom and when Kearney had an estimated population of 10,000 in 1889, citizens voted favorably upon a public library tax. Subsequently, the City Council appointed a Board of Trustees. The members of this first board were: Dr. O. S. Marden, Ira B. Marden, Judge A. H. Conner, Reverend John Askin, Captain Joseph Black, H. M. Seeley, Mrs. Nancy Hull, Mrs. Nora Jones, and Mrs. Etta R. Holmes. It was this board that voted to purchase Mr. Skinner's collection. The board also appointed Mrs. Hadassah Grant Seaman as the first librarian. Mrs. Seaman was succeeded in 1899 by Miss Belle Farley.

It was Miss Farley who guided the board through the period when they applied to the Carnegie Foundation for funds to build a library building.

This was a bad time in Kearney's history. The city's boom times had ended. By 1900, the city's population had decreased to almost half of the estimated population of 10,000 in 1889 and the 1900 census listed the population as 5,634.

Still, when a grant of \$10,000 was received from the Carnegie Foundation in 1903, Mrs. C. O. (Lottie) Norton gave the city a lot at the corner of 21st Street and First Avenue. This lot was across the street from her home and was expressly designated as the site for a library building. The Elks Club presently occupies the site on which Mrs. Norton's home had been located.



Kearney Public Library c. 1904

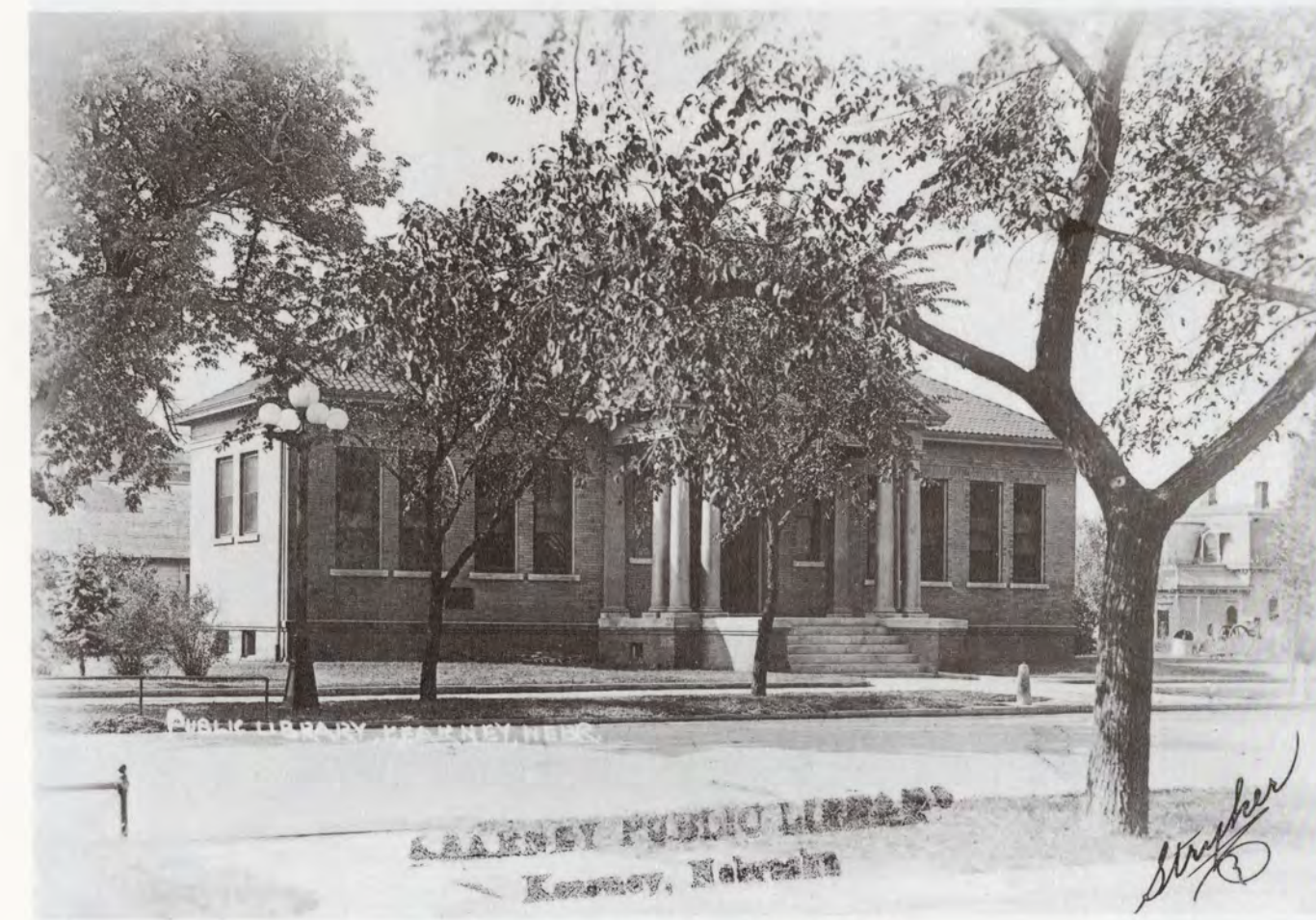
THE FIRST BUILDING AND SLOW DECADES

The Carnegie Library opened on December 1, 1904.

It was during this period that an event took place that was to have a significant and ongoing impact on the development of Kearney. The state's third institution of higher education, Western State Normal, opened in Kearney June 15, 1905.

Miss Farley had died before the Carnegie Library had been completed and she was succeeded briefly by her sister Mrs. Mary E. O'Brien. Miss Mary Ray became librarian in 1903 and she served

in this position until 1907 when Mrs. Pauline (Augustus) Frank became librarian. She is credited with cataloging the library's collection.



Kearney library - original Carnegie building - 1904



Kearney Public Library - Bird bath



Adult Reading Room, 1931 - Portrait by Lawton Parker, Major General Philip Kearny Bust

By 1909, the library's collection had increased to almost 8,000 books and the circulation for the year was 32,337. A New Era-Standard article commented, "Our library is inadequate in equipment to demands put on it."

The first four decades of this century for Kearney probably could best be described as a period of slow but steady growth which saw the community gradually reach once again its boom time population of 10,000 of 1889. This description of slow but steady growth could apply equally to the growth of the library.

Even though use of the library and the collection continued to increase during these years, it was not until 1939, however, that action was taken to enlarge the library's facilities. On May 11, a special meeting was held to discuss a W.P.A. project for a new west wing. By the end of the year, December 14, the new wing with a full basement was completed.

Use of the library's facilities and collection increased sharply when during World War II from the opening of the Kearney Air Base until the end of the war in 1945 nearly 2,000 service men were library patrons.



Children's Room, 1931 - From the west side of the library looking east

A TIME OF GROWTH

Beginning in 1951, Kearney, as was also true of the library, entered a time of unprecedented growth. In 1958, an east wing for children's materials was added.

It was also during this period that a second event took place that, like the opening of Western State Normal in 1905, was to have a significant and ongoing impact on the development of Kearney. This was the construction of Interstate 80 which is located on the city's southern perimeter. In 1958, for example, the city had purchased a block of ground on south Second Avenue for \$7,000. Five years later in 1963 because this property was near the interstate the city sold the lot for \$75,000.

In 1967 the library was designated a regional library by the Nebraska Library Commission. In addition to its primary role as the public library for the city of Kearney, the library also served the interlibrary loan needs of Dawson County to the west. Also in 1967 the library began bookmobile service for the residents of Buffalo County outside the Kearney city limits. The bookmobile service started as a two-year trial demonstration funded by the Library Commission with federal funds. At the end of the trial demonstration period, the Buffalo County Board of Supervisors voted to continue the service. The library also operated a bookmobile in Dawson County starting in 1970, but voters in the county voted in 1974 to stop service.

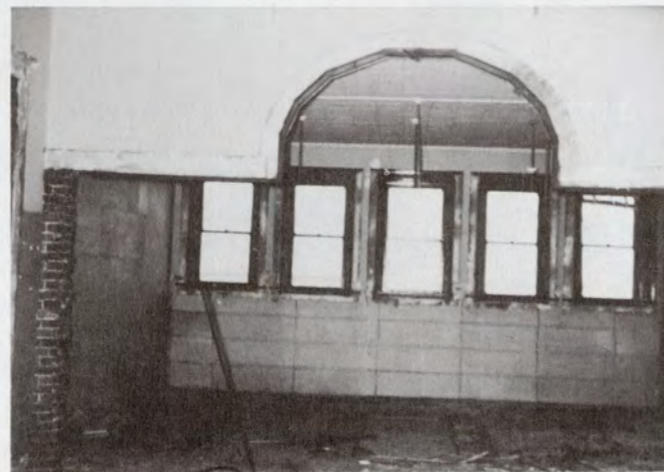
In 1966, the board had submitted a bond issue for a new library building to the voters. However, this attempt for a new library building failed.



Kearney Public Library
Circulation Desk: 1931



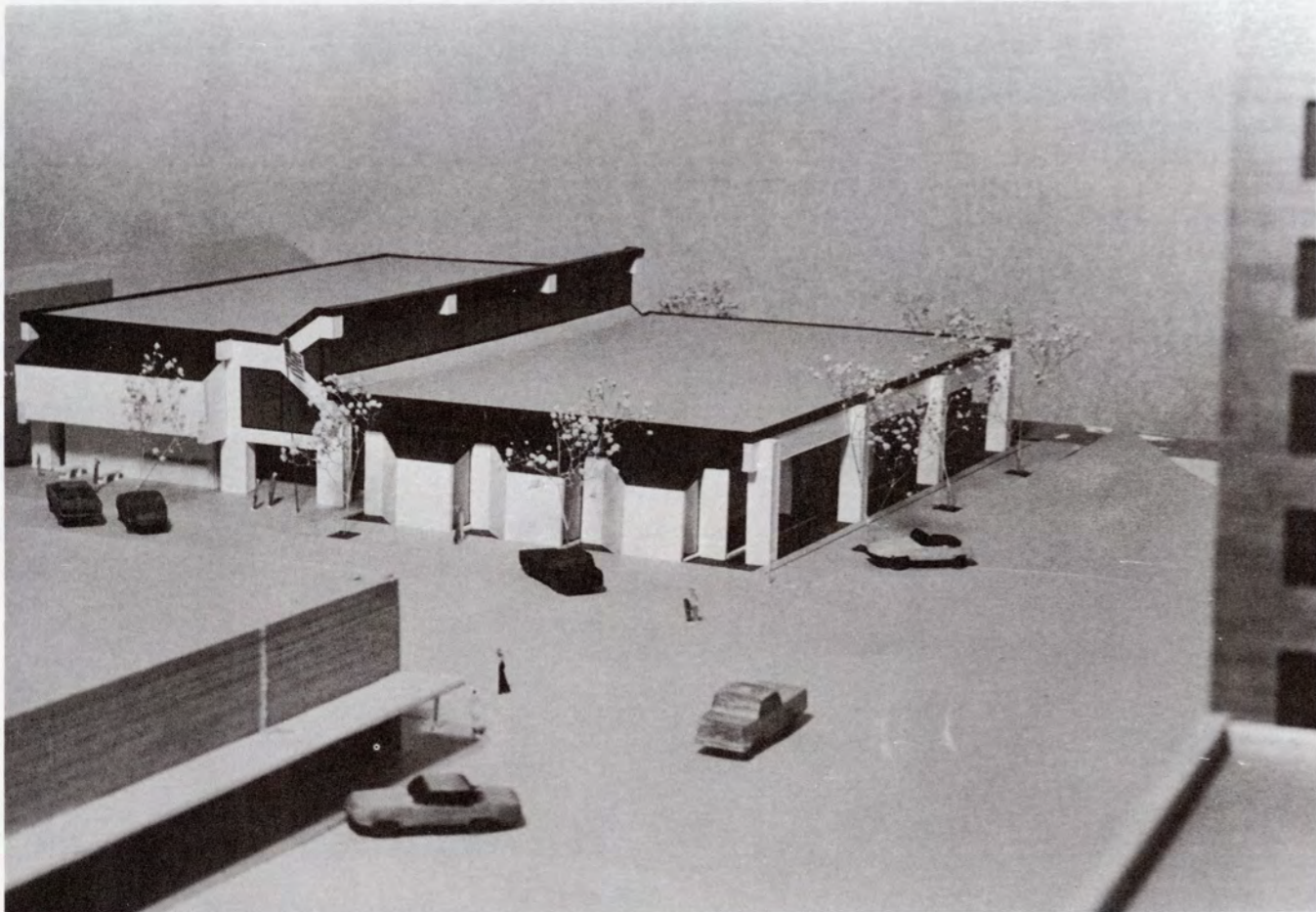
Kearney Public Library
Circulation Desk: 1972



Kearney Public Library
Circulation Area: 1973 during Demolition



The library was designated a Regional library by the Nebraska Library Commission in 1967



Model of proposed library

THE NEW BUILDING

By 1972, the library's annual circulation had increased to over 87,000 and the collection had increased to 41,000. There was no space left in the library building for any further increase in the collection. In November, 1972 the board again submitted a bond issue for a new library building to the voters. Through the hard work of the board, concerned citizens, and the members of the Friends of the Kearney Public Library, which had been organized in 1969 with Mrs. Gordon Morrow as president, the bond issue for \$744,700 passed.

In June, 1973 the library's collection was moved to temporary quarters in Randall Hall on the Kearney State College campus and the library was razed. To supplement service, the bookmobile which had been operated in Dawson County was located at various supermarket parking lots weekday afternoons.

The firm of Clark and Enersen, Hamersky, Schlaebitz, Burroughs and Thomsen of Lincoln was selected as the architects for the project and the groundbreaking ceremony for the new library building was held September 7, 1973.



GROUNDBREAKING CEREMONY

For the

KEARNEY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Friday, September 7, 1973

4:00 p.m.



Invocation Rev. Foster Meyers

Introduction of Speakers:

Mrs. Jacquelyn Rosenlof, President
Kearney Public Library, Board of Trustees

Dr. Francis Richards, Mayor
City of Kearney

Groundbreaking

Participants

Dr. Francis Richards
Mrs. Jacquelyn Rosenlof

Mr. Ray Lundy,
City Manager

Miss Emma Jane Wilder,
Board of Trustees

Mrs. Mary Elliott,
Board of Trustees

Mrs. Marian Brown,
Board of Trustees

Dr. Dean Lane,
Board of Trustees

Mr. Ron Norman, Director
Kearney Public Library

Mr. Al Hamersky,
Architect

Benediction Rev. Foster Myers



Groundbreaking - September 7, 1973
left to right: Merle Roeder, Contractor
Dr. L. Dean Lane, Board Member
Mrs. Robert Rosenlof, Board President
Dr. Francis L. Richards, Mayor

The Kearney Public Library Board of Trustees

requests the pleasure of your company at the

official dedication of the new library

2020 First Avenue

Sunday, July 27, 1975

3:00 P.M.

Refreshment and tour following

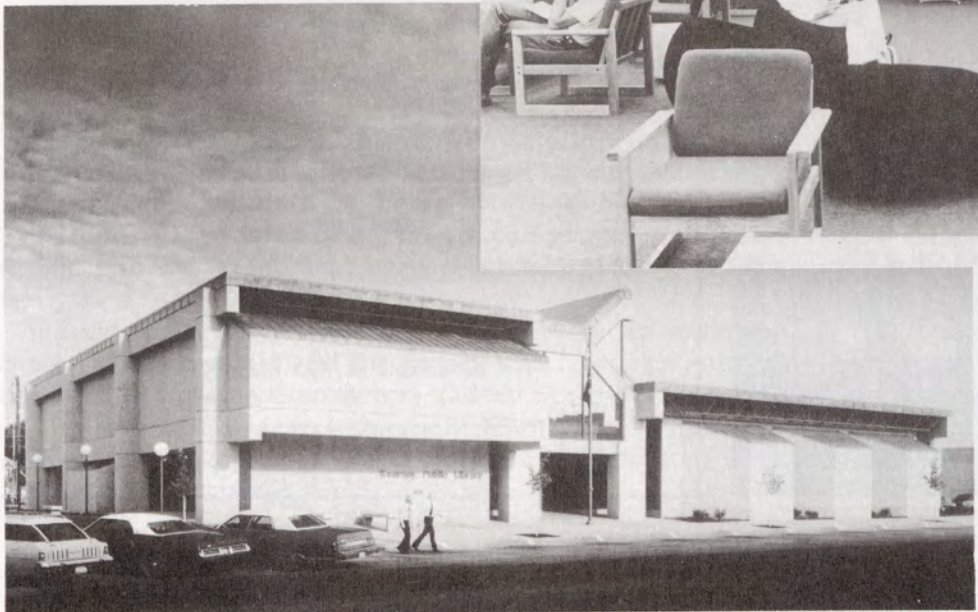


Overcrowded, 1972

How Good Is Your Library?

What Should Your Library Do For You?

A slide program was used during the bond campaign for a new library.

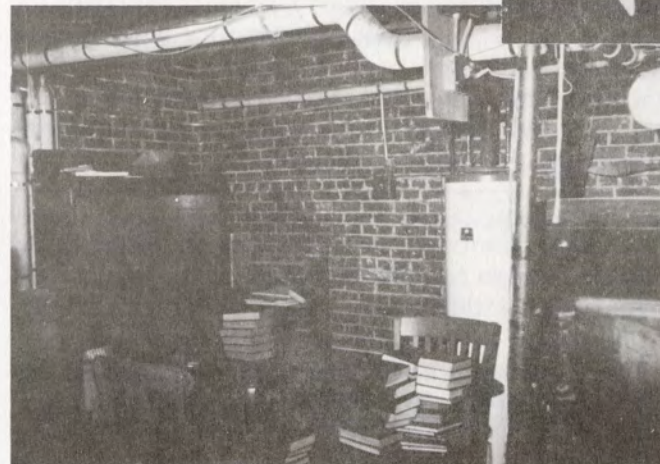


Service To All Residents'



KNOWLEDGE

Overcrowded, 1972



HONORS

For their successful effort in obtaining the bond issue, the board was awarded the Trustees Citation by the Nebraska Library Association in October, 1973 at the Association's annual convention in Lincoln. Board members during the bond campaign and the planning and construction of the new library building were; Mrs. Robert Rosenlof, president, Mrs. George Brown, Mrs. Joseph Elliott, Sr., Dr. L. Dean Lane, and Emma Jane Wilder.

Sixteen years later and again in Lincoln in October, 1989, the Friends of the Library were co-recipients of the Nebraska Library Association's Meritorious Service Award for their work during the bond campaign and for their continuous support of the library through volunteer work, the purchase of needed equipment and materials, and their advocacy of adequate funding for both the bookmobile and the library.

With this award, the library became the first public library in the state to have received both the Trustees and Meritorious Service Awards.

The new library building opened June 26, 1975.

MAJOR GIFTS AND THE LIBRARY FOUNDATION

In 1976 the library received the first of many grants from the Myron Scott Trust Fund. This was a \$4,000 grant for the purchase of equipment for the new library. The most recent grant from this fund was for the publication of this history. Colonel Scott, a Kearney native, had placed his estate in a trust fund with the stipulation that the income from it would be used for community historical and cultural projects.

In 1981 in anticipation of that time in the future when the library would be the recipient of major grants and bequests, the Kearney Public Library Foundation was established and incorporated with the state as a non-profit corporation. Six years later in 1988 the Internal Revenue Service approved a 501 (c) (3) tax exempt status for the foundation.

The first major gift the foundation received was in 1982 from the Ellen W. Craig Foundation. Mrs. Craig, who as a child was a regular user of the library, made her gift for the development of a Computer Education Center for the benefit of the library's patrons. The next year, 1983, the foundation received its second major gift when it began receiving quarterly payments from the income of a trust fund established by Dr. L. M. Stearns, a physician, who had had a practice in Kearney some years previously.

Other significant gifts to the foundation since these two gifts have been a memorial to her mother Wessie Wilder, who had been a member of the library board for many years, by Emma Jane Wilder, a memorial to Dr. L. Dean Lane who had been a member of the board at the time of the successful library bond campaign and the construction of the library building, and a bequest from Dr. Lane's estate.

Miss Wilder's memorial to her mother was used to start the library's audiovisual collection and Dr. Lane's memorial was used to develop the library's courtyard to the south of the building. Because the courtyard was particularly important to Dr. Lane and in recognition of his contributions to the library through the years, the courtyard in late 1990 was designated the Dr. L. Dean Lane Memorial Courtyard at the suggestion of the board and with the approval of the City Council. Dr. Lane in his will directed that one-half of the income from his bequest to the library be used to purchase non-fiction books and finance lectures, seminars, or exhibits for technical, scientific, or historical topics with the other half of the income to be used to increase the capital of the fund.

CIRCULATION AND COMMUNITY USE OF THE LIBRARY

One of the major criteria for judging how effectively a library is serving its community is circulation. Circulation cannot indicate the quality of a library's collection. It also cannot indicate how many persons use the collection. Nevertheless, circulation is important in that it indicates the degree to which the citizens of the community use the collection.

For the 1971-1972 fiscal year, the last full year the library operated in the Carnegie building, library circulation was 87,446. For the 1975-1976 fiscal year, the first full year the library operated in the new

building, library circulation was 191,818. For the 1989-1990 fiscal year, the library's centennial year, library circulation was 246,807 an increase from the 1971-1972 circulation of 87,446 of 159,358 or 182 percent.

In addition, from 1971 to 1990 the library's collection increased from 41,000 to 75,000.

The library also, through a service contract with Buffalo County, continues to provide library services and operates a bookmobile for the residents of Buffalo County outside the city limits.

During the library's one hundredth year of service to the Kearney community and Buffalo County, a number of records were set:

- the highest average daily circulation - 1,240 items per day
- the highest annual circulation for the library - 246,807
- the highest annual circulation for the bookmobile - 124,444
- the most items ever circulated by the Children's Department - 117,086
- the highest enrollment for the library's Summer Reading Program - 809
- the highest enrollment for the bookmobile's Summer Reading Program - 366

ONE HUNDRED YEARS

In anticipation of the library's centennial year, the board in 1987 invited the Nebraska Library Association to hold its annual convention in Kearney in 1990. The Association accepted the board's invitation and met in Kearney in a joint convention with the Nebraska Educational Media Association October 24-26. Children's Librarian Carol Reed was local Arrangements Chair for the convention. She was assisted by the library staff, librarians from the Calvin T. Ryan Library at Kearney State College, soon to be the University of Nebraska-Kearney, and parochial and public school media specialists.

Also in anticipation of the centennial year, a Centennial Committee with Adult Services Librarian Mary Johns as Chair, was formed in 1989 and began planning a series of events for 1990. These events started with a Centennial Kickoff Breakfast in January, 1990 and continued through the year. Centennial activities have included book repair workshops, an essay and poster contest for grades K-6, a Buffalo County Spelling Bee, a tree planting on Arbor Day on the area south of the library which was officially designated at this time as the library's courtyard and later given the name of the Dr. L. Dean Lane Memorial Courtyard, co-sponsored with the Friends of the Library the appearance of writer and humorist Joan Burney at the Friends Annual Meeting, co-sponsored with the Buffalo County Historical Society a tour of Victorian Era homes in Kearney, a quilt display, a joke and riddle night, the official birthday party September 1, an adult spelling bee, and a program honoring board members, Friends, and contributors to the library in late October.

THE FUTURE

In 1983 the library board voted to change the name of the library from the Kearney Public Library to the Kearney Public Library and Information Center to focus attention on one of the major roles of the library which is to provide information. The library provides information not only in the traditional form of the printed word-books, magazines, newspapers-but also in the newer forms in which information is electronically stored and retrieved.

The library of the future will have a mixture of the traditional and contemporary information modes.

As the Kearney Public Library and Information Center celebrates its first century of service and accomplishments, it simultaneously looks to the future and a second century of service and growth.

This history of the Kearney Public Library and Information Center is made possible by a grant from the Myron Scott Trust Fund.

Bibliography:

1. Nielsen, Margaret Stives. "The Kearney Public Library, 1890-1990." Buffalo Tales: The Official Publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society (March 1990).
2. Bessie, Ella L. "History of Kearney." Where the Buffalo Roam: Stories of the Early Days in Buffalo County (N.D.): 29-37.
3. Kearney Daily Hub Centennial Edition, 29 June, 1973.

Library Board of Trustees, 1990

Dr. Larry Peterson, President (term expired June, 1990)
Dr. Charles A. Peek, Treasurer (term expired June, 1990)
Dr. Richard D. Turner, President
Marilyn Jussel, Treasurer
Marietta Sims, Secretary
Orba Brink
Jan Hall

Kearney Public Library Foundation Board, 1990

The Foundation Board consists of the five members of the Board of Trustees and four citizens appointed by the Board of Trustees.

Ron Cope (term expires March, 1991)
Emma Jane Wilder (term expires March, 1992)
Jo Baldwin (term expires March, 1993)
Jean Gallant (term expires March, 1994)

Friends of the Kearney Public Library Board, 1990

Linda Price, President
Sharon Mason, First Vice-President
Jean Gallant, Second Vice-President
Carole Nelson, Secretary
Pat Hendrickson, Treasurer
Judy Piasecki, Director #1
Dorothy Wilson, Director #2
Russ Hansen, Director by Special Appointment
Ardella Webb, Past President
Francine Bahm, Library Staff Liaison
John Bahm, Nominating Committee Chair
Sid Sanders, Nominating Committee
Sharon Mason, Nominating Committee

Centennial Committee

Mary Johns, Adult Services Librarian, Chair
Mary Elliott
Diana Keith
Fran Lane
John Mayeski
Barry Sherman
Marietta Sims

Library Staff

Ron Norman, Director
Mary Johns, Adult Services Librarian
Carol Engel, Bookmobile Librarian
Carol Reed, Children's Librarian
Francine Bahm, Technical Services Librarian
Heidi Carpenter
Jane Christensen
Beverly Edson
Mary Elliott
Carol Erickson
Althea Graves
Hallie Hagan
Rochelle Hunt
Julie Meyer
Warren Miller
Antoni Moreau
Linda Murrish
Judy Piasecki
Gina Sayer
Patricia Smith
Barbara Stevenson
Deniece Waggoner

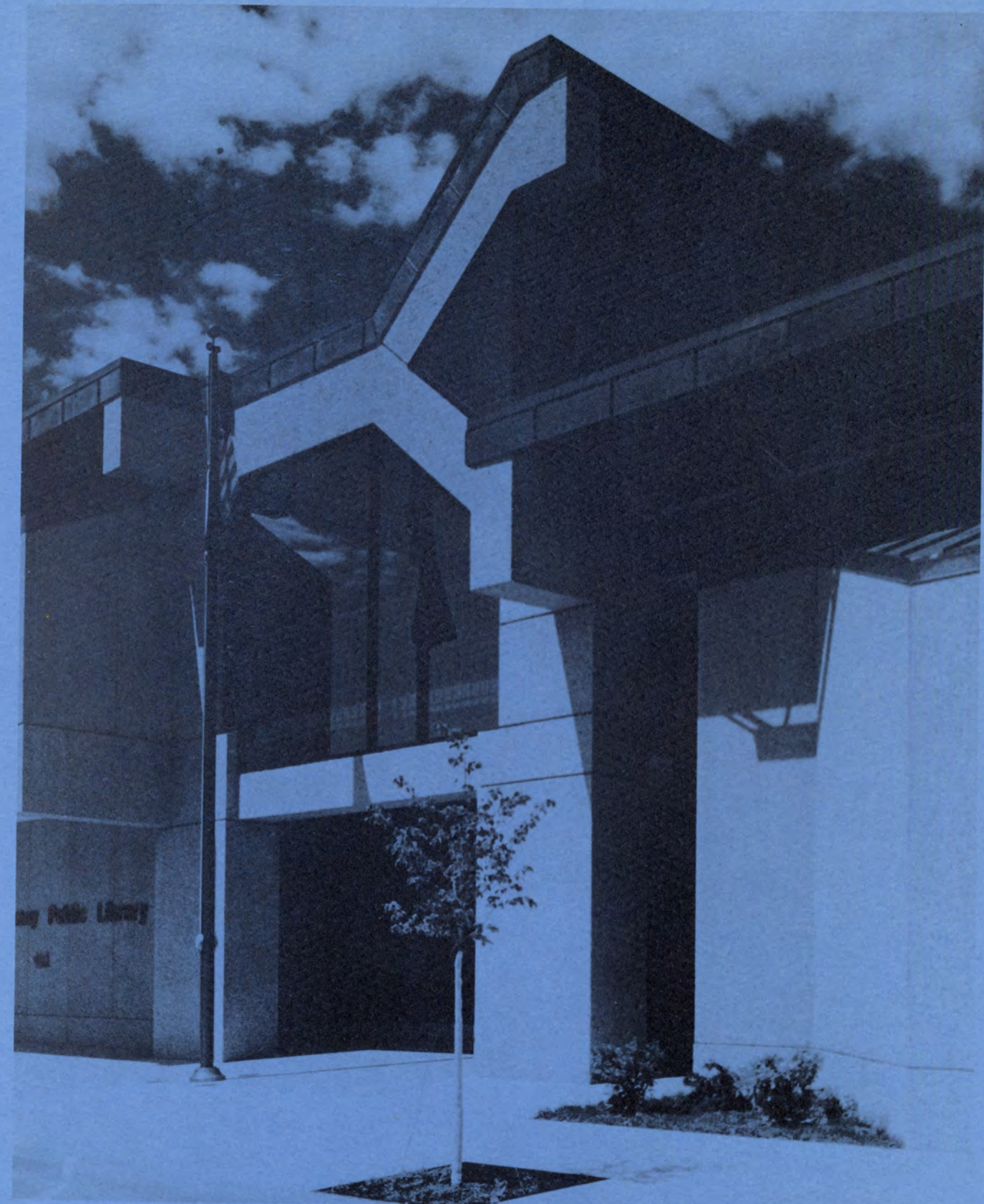
Librarians

1890-1899 Mrs. Hadassah Seaman
1899-1903 Miss Belle Farley
1903 Mrs. Mary O'Brien (Acting Director)
1903-1907 Miss Mary R. Ray
1907-1919 Mrs. Pauline Frank
1920-1939 Mrs. Mary O'Brien
1940-1942 Miss Margaret M. Caffall
1942-1952 Mrs. P. I. Knight
1952-1962 Mrs. Clarence Brasch
1962 Miss Mary McConnell
1962-1967 Mrs. Hazel Tewell
1967-1969 Mrs. Ellen Thompson
1969-1971 Mrs. Phyllis Winn, Mrs. Pat Clark,
Mrs. Beverly Bishop (Acting Directors)
1971- Mr. Ron Norman

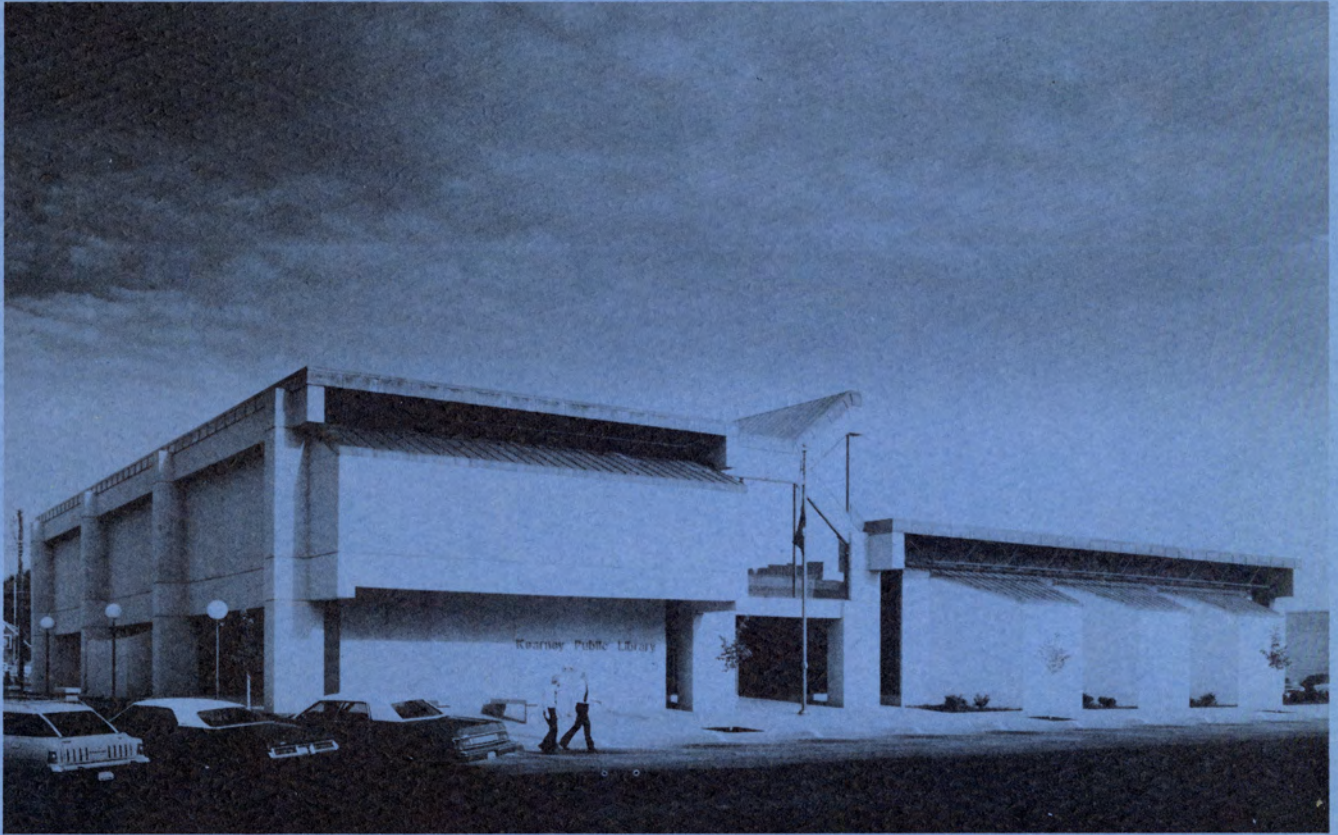
Centennial Celebration Committee

General Chair: Jackie Rosenlof
Decorations: Jack & Joan Erickson
Library Open House: George & Marian Brown
Alice Howell
Philip Holmgren
Library Staff
Friends of the Library

This history is printed on acid-free paper.



Present building - Photo by Dave Clifton



Kearney Public Library
& Information Center:

the First Century
1890-1990