

The History of the Mitchell Public Library 1908-1977¹

In *The Hillsdale Leader* for Friday, July 17, 1908 there is an article describing the dedication of the Mitchell Public Library. *The Hillsdale Standard*, another newspaper in town, also included an article describing the dedication on Tuesday, July 14, 1908: “the formal opening and dedication of the Mitchell Public Library, the gift to the city of Hillsdale by the late Hon. C. T. Mitchell, will occur, tomorrow (Wednesday) afternoon at 2:30 pm, if the day is fine the exercise will be held on the library lawn. If the day is wet, the program will be given in the library building.”

This gift of Charles Tenant Mitchell was made in his will dated October 29, 1895. He was seventy-eight and had lived a long and good life. The town had been good to him. He had been a man of modest means when he came to Michigan from New York fifty seven years ago. Now after much hard work, he was one of the top men in the city—rich, influential and revered. His will gave his home, upon his death and that of his wife, to the people of Hillsdale for use as a public library, and \$10,000.00 in securities to equip and furnish it.

His work on the construction of the Adrian-Hillsdale railroad from 1838-1841, the establishment of the first Hillsdale bank in cooperation with Henry Waldron and John P. Cook in 1855, and his appointment to the Republican national Convention in Baltimore where Abraham Lincoln was nominated for a second term were all mentioned in statement of Judge F. H. Stone at the dedication of the library.

Although Mitchell made no provisions in his will as to what the library should be called, he must have secretly desired that the library should be named after him. If so, his secret desire was fulfilled when the formal dedication of the library took place Wednesday, July 15, 1908, ten years after his death.

Thus, the Mitchell Public Library was dedicated, but what did the people of Hillsdale, Michigan do to satisfy a desire to read prior to 1908? Let’s go back into the 1800’s and see the evolution of the public library in Hillsdale.

The Credit for its first circulation library should perhaps go to J.O. Ames, who as early as 1875, had a collection of books in his store available to the public on a rental basis. Hillsdale College, like many colleges did not have a general library, but seven separate libraries for the use various groups of students, with separate reading rooms for the girls and the boys. The several Sunday Schools at different times had collections of books to be loaned to their children. But Hillsdale as a community had no library where books might be borrowed by the public until 1879. A few efforts were made by individual citizens to establish one, but they all failed.

In the winter of 1879, however, some civic-minded woman of the town took the matter into their own hands, with the idea of forming a literary association to circulate good

¹ Adapted from *150 Years in The Hills and Dales: A Bicentennial History of Hillsdale County, Michigan*

literature among the people of Hillsdale. They issued the following petition in the month of March:

To: Timothy E. Dibell, a Justice of the Peace of the County of Hillsdale. We, the undersigned, proprietors of a library, apply to you to issue your warrant, to be issued to one of our members, directing her to call a meeting of the proprietors for the purpose of forming a corporation under the provision of Chapter 110 of the Compiled Laws of the State of Michigan for the year 1871. Dated Hillsdale, March 18, 1879. Signed: Caroline W. Waldron, Cornelia M. Knickerbocker, Florence D. Bunt and Ellen Pratt.

The Warrant was issued to Caroline W. Waldron and at the ensuing meeting, articles of association were adopted and officers elected.

A Board of Directors was elected, a committee was chosen to solicit stockholders, and another committee was appointed to find a suitable room for the library. As a result the room on the southwest corner of Howell and McCollum Streets, over the dry goods store of J. H. Marvin, was rented at \$50.00 year and the book committee was authorized to select books. The first annual meeting was held on March 16, 1880 and the "Ladies Library Association of Hillsdale" reported the library had 522 books and 79 members holding 98 shares.

Entertainments of all sorts, public and private plays, and benefits were used to raise money for the increasing demand for books. Two bequests, totaling \$105.00 were received, as well as gifts of money. In 1900 a cook book was published which made a nice profit. The library attempted to meet the needs of all through book selections.

Mrs. Whittier, the first librarian, a sister of Mrs. Charles T. Mitchell continued in office until March, 1886. By this time the library had grown to such an extent that it was necessary to pay the librarian, even though the library was only open on Saturday afternoons. The Library changed rooms three times before it found its eventual home at the corner of Manning and McCollum Streets.

"At his death of C. T. Mitchell one of the city's early settlers and most substantial citizen, his spacious home on the corner of Manning and McCollum Streets was bequeathed to the City to take effect after the death of his wife. Mrs. Mitchell died on May 6, 1906, and on November 14 of the same year a meeting of the stockholders of the Ladies Library Association was called by Mrs. F. O. Hancock, the secretary, to consider the future of the association, since the need for it no longer existed." At the meeting, it was decided to give the Mitchell Public Library all of the books belonging to Ladies Library Association. The gift was accepted, but, as the new building was not yet ready for occupancy, the Ladies' Library continued the circulation of books until February 1908, when all books were called in, repaired, and delivered to the Mitchell Library on March 1. The Ladies turned over 2666 volumes to the new institution.

After Mrs. Mitchell's death, there was a delay in the opening of the library due to the current problems that faced the board. The question arose as to whether the Mitchell home should be used or returned to the heirs and its value in money used for the construction of a building especially intended for library purposes. It was decided to use the old home as that was Mr. Mitchell's original intention. Then it was found that there was not sufficient money to cover the necessary remodeling and maintenance, for the trust fund covered only the expenses for furnishing, shelving and books.

Through the generosity of Mr. William Mitchell of Cadillac, Michigan, and Dr. and Mrs. Walter H. Sawyer of Hillsdale, Michigan, the remodeling work was allowed to go on. "They made their contribution to the library so it could be completed perfectly in accordance with the whole architectural plan." The dedication took place on July 15, 1908.

Mr. Mitchell's home was remodeled inside to be better suited for a library. Some walls and a fireplace were removed from the main floor and the stairs to the second floor were relocated for convenience. The original butternut woodwork was preserved, as were the beautiful Italian coved ceilings. The library itself was located on the main floor, together with reading and study rooms, and a reading room for men. The men could not only read and rest in the reading room, but smoke also if they wished. The second story contained a fine auditorium where various clubs of the city could meet and the third floor held the kitchen and loft for dances.

The remodeled home gave Hillsdale a library that was probably one of the finest in the state, for a town of its size, during the early 1900's. By the terms of the Mitchell will, the Board of Education was to act as the Library Board with full control of all funds, personnel and policies. The library facilities were also to be used by the Hillsdale Public Schools, the first such arrangement in the state. One Board member was designated "Library Trustee" and was responsible for all reports to the Board. Miss Mary Pratt was hired as the first librarian, with Miss Nell Rowley as her assistant. Miss Pratt had been a member of the first class to graduate from Vassar College, as had Mr. Mitchell's daughter, Kate.

Miss Pratt reported the following number of volumes on the new shelves: "From the probate library of C.T. Mitchell 322; from the Ladies Library 2522; from other friends, 208; purchased with the C.T. Mitchell bequest, 2786; Total: 5836. The number of periodicals totaled 34."

Two of the most popular features of the building in the earlier days were the Club Room on the second floor and the Library Loft, with its adjoining kitchen, on the third floor. In the Club Room (meaning the second floor auditorium) every Monday was held the meeting of the Women's Improvement Club. Other cultural organizations, such as the Tuesday Musicale, were given the privilege of its use on their individual afternoons or evenings. Afterwards all would adjourn to the Loft for refreshments.

About 1916-1917 the Historical Room was started on the second floor with the D.A.R. Genealogical Shelf as a nucleus. There were several items of interest in the Historical Room: the album of the first World War veterans which contains pictures of many men who became prominent in Hillsdale later; the old Jonesville paper copied almost entirely by hand; the old newspapers -- a complete file of *The Hillsdale Daily News*; pictures of Bull Run and other Civil War prints as well as personnel records from that war.

During World War I, when the American Expeditionary Force was sent overseas, the Library became the headquarters of the county Red Cross unit and cooperated with the war work of the American Library Association.

On July 13, 1933, the silver anniversary of the dedication of the Library was celebrated with a program at the High School auditorium. As coincidence would have it, this was just one hundred years after the first community tax-supported library was opened to the public in Peterboro, New Hampshire.

By this time, Miss Nellie Rowley, who had been assistant librarian, was head librarian. She had taken over in 1924. Miss Rowley's training, like Miss Pratt's was limited. Book selection was under the capable supervision of Carl L. Bailey, secretary of the School Board and member in charge of the library.

In 1935 Leithel (Mrs. Robert) Ford who had been Supervisor of the Hillsdale School Libraries was asked to head both the school libraries and the public library. During the first year of this arrangement, Miss Carol Hawkes was the Mitchell Public Librarian. She was the first graduate trained librarian for Hillsdale. Mrs. Ford, a college graduate, with and English major training in library science, received her master's with funds made available by the Kellogg Foundation.

It was under Mrs. Ford and Miss Carol Hawkes that Mitchell Public Library began to function as a true public library. They purchased the first copies of "Dewey Decimal Classification" and "Sears List of Subject Headings." They over-hauled the entire card catalog and brought all record keeping up to accepted library standards.

Miss Hawkes and Mrs. Ford were able to make the Historical Room usable to the patrons interested in genealogical research. Mrs. Ford reorganized the Reference section of the library and removed all fiction books from the Reference Shelf.

However, all this would not have been possible to complete without the aid of the United States government and Mitchell Public's next librarian, Miss Louise Hawkes. The government, through the WPA and NYA programs, made funds available to pay Hillsdale College students and others for work in the library.

Miss Louise Hawkes, sister of Carol Hawkes, had been working for Mrs. Ford at the High School Library and was transferred to the Public Library in 1936, when her sister accepted a position at Hillsdale College. Louise received her library training from Western Reserve University and was head librarian from 1936 to 1966. Under her

leadership the summer story hour was initiated which is still looked forward to by hundreds of young Hillsdale boys and girls. A broad expansion of services took place during this time. This included the hiring of three additional library assistants.

The Kellogg Foundation not only made funds available for Mrs. Ford to attend graduate school, but also for the buying of books. For every five old books the library could collect, the Kellogg Foundation would buy the Mitchell Library a new book, at the average price of \$2.00 per volume. Then the University of Michigan examined the old books and if they were of value, restored and placed them in the University library.

There was some talk in the thirties of a county library system in Hillsdale County, with Mrs. Ford as a strong advocate. But, because of the depression, funds were limited and the library lost the fight for an increase in funds to the schools. That ended the county library movement.

In 1951 and 1952 Board member and library trustee, A. W. Pennock, tried in vain to get the city of Hillsdale to spend some money to renovate the library. The City Council was able to promise \$1500.00, but this sum was very inadequate as the entire outside was in dire need of attention.

In 1954, however, the city fathers voted to renovate the library. The roof was replaced and four 32 foot columns were placed in front of the library on a concrete porch. This replaced the former on story columns and the wooded porch.

In 1958, the fiftieth anniversary was celebrated with a large book display, on loan from the Michigan State Library. An open house was planned, and then canceled until the interior of the library could be painted. The painting was not completed until the spring of 1959 and the open house was held in the summer of 1959, one year late.

In 1958 an individual arrived in Hillsdale who made some changes affecting the Mitchell Library. He was Orville Meyer, the new city manager. Mr. Meyer realized the library was not getting the full benefit of its penal fines while under the direction of the School Board. Through his leadership all financial direction was transferred from the School Board to City Hall. The School Board is now represented by one voting member.

Miss Louise Hawkes, who resigned in 1966, after thirty years of faithful service devoted to the library work, received \$90 a month when she started work there. The city gave the library \$4500 the first year compared to \$17,325 in 1966. In this period of time, the number of adult borrowers had increased one and half times; the number of juveniles, three and a half times; the number of non-resident borrowers had increased from 2186 to 4562.

The summer reading program started locally the first year Miss Hawkes was librarian. In the thirty-first year of the program, the attendance had gone from 645 children with 468 books checked out for the eleven weeks, to one hundred children coming the opening day and checking out 495 books the same day.

The “Library Lady” was honored by a banquet given by the School Board and was designated the City Historian. A dogwood tree, growing beside the library blossomed for the first time the day she left as though saying “good-bye” to the kind Library Lady.

In July of 1966, the Mitchell Public Library acquired its sixth librarian, Mr. Raymond Ogden, a young man from North Dakota. He received his undergraduate training at the University of North Dakota, and while in Hillsdale enrolled in the Library School at Western Michigan University. He later became librarian at an Upper Peninsula college library.

In April of 1970, James Gordon Jaeger became the seventh librarian. He served previously at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland, 1964-68, the Clinton Public and the Monroe County Library. Mr. Jaeger, who was born in 1941, in Illinois, graduated from Blackman College, Carlinsville, Illinois, with a major in history, from Indiana University at Bloomington with a Library Science degree.

It appears that the history of the Mitchell Public Library is similar to that of many public libraries in the United States. Beginning with the collection of a group of small libraries and the bequest of a philanthropist for a building and books, it was slowly evolved to what we consider a small excellent public library today.

Library Directors of the Mitchell Public Library: 1908-2005

Mary Pratt (1908-1924)
Nell Rowley (1924-1935)
Liethel Ford (1935)
Carol Hawkes (1935)
Louise Hawkes (1936-1966)
Raymond Ogden (1966-1970)
James Jaeger (1970-1977)
Randy Ballinger (1977-1983)
Sally Arrive (1983-1985)
Debbie Kirley (1985-1986)
Janet Johnston (1986-1989)
Ranae Scott (1989-1990)
Diana Pierson (1990-1998)
Jacqueline Morris (1998-2005)
Mark Maier (2005 to Present)