

Winter Haven Public Library: A Timeline

by Phyllis Reese Gilbert

1914 It was announced that the new library will be situated on the second floor of the new Englesen-Linger building, which Bill Craig built on the present site of the Red Cross rooms. The Civic League announces it will take at least 300 members to swing this deal. They receive donations and one month's rent given by the building's owners.

1915 Women's Civic League takes over the running of the Winter Haven Public Library. Before that time, a few books on a shelf in a downtown drugstore comprised the library. For a short time, the Women's Christian Temperance Union ran the library, but real stability and progress came under the aegis of the Women's Civic League (today's Woman's Club of Winter Haven), founded by Dr. Mary B. Jewett in 1913. The club ran the library from 1915 to 1952. Dr. Jewett served as chair of the library board from 1915 to 1927.

1916 Civic League held a board meeting and discussed its new building project. Mrs. Florence Inman (sister of Dr. Jewett) gave the club \$5,000 for the purpose of building the clubhouse with a library attached. The club was to pay her six percent interest during her lifetime, but at her death, it was to be the undisputed possession of the club. Besides the offer she gave them \$1,944 for books.

1920 The Winter Haven City Council voted to give the City Library \$300 per month. This support would continue until 1955, when a new library building opened and a millage was added to city taxes that paid for and helped support it.

1924 Remodeling done to the city library building, formerly the first W.W. Mann home on Central Avenue.

First W.W. Mann home, a two-story white frame house (circa 1912) sat 200 feet east of Third Street and Central, on right-hand side going east. The Women's Civic League bought the house; the city owned the land. Dr. Jewett lent the money to the club at a low interest rate. At Dr. Jewett's death in 1928, her will stated that any remaining monies owed on the building by the club would be forgiven. The club made money by renting the second-floor apartment, reached by outside metal stairs, to the librarian or to others. (Margaret Counts Poitras, a former elementary school teacher, lived there when she first came to the city.)

1926 Club hired a librarian, purportedly Mrs. P.V.R. Griffin (Blanche), who had been reference librarian in the Public Library of Indianapolis, Indiana, before her marriage and subsequent move to Florida in 1925.

1952 The Civic League relinquished control of the library to the City

of Winter Haven, donating the two-story frame building, the entire book collection, and plans and monies toward the building of a new facility.

1953 The new library was to be located on the "bowling on the green" area adjacent on the east side of the existing building. A city tax for the library was approved at a referendum vote called for this purpose, which brought about a new brick building on Central Avenue East. Dr. Mary B. Jewett had left the library \$15,000 in her will which had been kept invested so that it was a nest egg for building. The library board was able to borrow money after the tax was added to the city tax list. One mill was voted for the library building. This brought in about \$8,000 per year that was to be used to pay off the loan. Mrs. Tom Swann was instrumental in lobbying for this tax increase to fund the library. At one time in the planning, the commissioners decided the library should be located on Third Street, NW, adjacent to the Florida Citrus Building and the new Health Department offices. Five women's organizations, including the Woman's Club, protested this change. Their argument was that the Central Avenue site was near the schools and the downtown area. The women put up a determined argument and persuaded the commissioners to reconsider the Central Avenue location.

1955 The original portion of the present brick building dates from 1955 and was 6,702 square feet. The building was designed by Bernard Wells Close, Architect of Jacksonville, Florida. A copy of his original design document is dated January 8, 1954.

Two construction bids were submitted, one for \$90,000.00 and a less-expensive structure for \$75,000.00. The \$90,000.00 new library building construction was completed in May, 1955. That same month, the public was invited for a grand opening on a Sunday. Guests were served cookies and limeade. Two days later was the official day for business with 600 transactions made. Newspaper pictures showed the library interior with many empty or partially filled shelves. The library holdings were 6,000 volumes. The collection had grown to 48,000 books and 152 magazine subscriptions by 1986. That year, the library employed nine full time and four part time librarians with twelve volunteers to assist.

1956 The Mann house was moved to Seventh Street, SW, on lots deeded by Mr. and Mrs. John Hanna to the Boys' Club when it was chartered that same year. The City sold the old library to the club for a dollar and counted the balance of its worth as its contribution to the organization. The building later became a florist shop and then a private residence.

1971 Kathryn Smith started working at the library.

1973 Mrs. Smith became head librarian, a position she still holds

1975 Winter Haven architect Gene Thompson designs an addition to the library. The modification added approximately 2,463 square feet to the library for a total library area of 9,165 square feet, and reoriented the entrance from Central Avenue to the south along an alleyway renamed Library Lane.

1976 Friends of the Winter Haven Public Library, Inc., (FOL) organized by Carl Strang, chairman of the City Library Board; Kathryn Smith, Head Librarian; and June Kuntz, an interested patron. The stated purposes of FOL are “to promote public interest and participation in the Winter Haven Public Library, its services, facilities, and needs, and to promote gifts of books, magazines, desirable collections, endowments, bequests, and any other thing which would be helpful to those using the facilities of the public library.” An Annual Sale of used books has netted thousands of dollars used by the library to purchase new books and needed items not covered by the City budget.

1990 Richard Waters from a Dallas consulting firm was hired to do a space-needs study for a new library. (\$7,000 of the \$14,000 fee came from FOL; the other \$7,000 from the City.) The study concluded that library circulation at the time warranted a building of 18,000 square feet. There was no thought of moving the location, so it was recommended that a two-story building, with a finished first floor and a skeleton second floor for later expansion plus a parking garage, be constructed. The building’s size would have been over 30,000 square feet at a total cost of \$6 million. The City Commission shelved the plan.

1991 In August the City purchased the Activities Annex portable for \$28,000 plus \$7,000 site improvement. The portable was placed on the lot occupied by the 1920s-era library. FOL sponsored a reception in honor of the opening of the new facility in October. During the event, the electricity failed; off went the lights and air-conditioning. The cause: a squirrel had been fried on a transformer.

1997 Polk County Library Cooperative established; usage of the Winter Haven facility increased by eleven percent.

1998 The City contracted for a *Space Needs Study for the Expansion of the Winter Haven Public Library* be prepared by Architects in Association Rood and Zwick, Inc., New Smyrna Beach, Florida.

1999 Rood and Zwick submit their study. The firm was subsequently hired as architects for the new library.

2002 Winter Haven received \$500,000 grant for new library construction from the State of Florida. Site selected for new 31,000 sq.ft. library on Fourth Street, Northwest, in the downtown area. The city block was originally the location of the A.R. Klemm residence, built at turn of 20th century. Klemm was a German immigrant and early citrus pioneer. By World War II the house was no longer occupied by the family and was used as a USO facility frequented by GIs stationed at Bartow Air Base. In 1949 the house was demolished and a Kwik Chek (later Winn-Dixie) grocery store built in its place. In the 1960s the store was converted to a county courthouse annex. The city of Winter Haven purchased the land from the county in 2002 for \$350,000 for

the purpose of demolishing the old courthouse.

The 1955 library building and lots, evaluated at about \$950,000, were sold for \$800,000 to a local doctor, Dr. Ernesto Perez. Additional acreage running all the way to 4th Street, S.E., had been purchased in the 1980s from Mrs. Wilma Ramsey when the City thought it would be needed for expansion. Mrs. Ramsey lived with her daughter and son-in-law, Kay and Mickey Giametta, in a small, white, framed house surrounded by beautiful Queen Crape Myrtles that the family rooted, potted, and sold. The 1991 Activities Portable was claimed by the Leisure Services Department and moved to a city-owned softball field adjacent to Polk Community College—the Diamondplex.

2003 Construction of new facility began in March by Kalamaris Construction Company, Tampa, Total construction cost—about \$5.3 million dollars.

2004 FOL’s 2004 project, “Finish and Furnish,” raised \$211,000 for the new library which opened to the public on July 6, 2004. With much fanfare, the library’s grand opening was held on September 18.

Special acknowledgement must be made of the contribution of former Commissioner Scott Girouard, library liaison for the commission. Scott kept the need for a new library before the commission when other civic projects continued to take priority. The library project might possibly have been delayed even longer without the interest and perseverance of Commissioner Scott Girouard.



Miss Clara Abel, who was Winter Haven’s librarian from the 1930s to the 1950s. Miss Abel came to Winter Haven at the behest of the previous librarian, Blanche Griffin. Mrs. Griffin became acquainted with Miss Abel in Indianapolis. Photograph courtesy of Elizabeth Griffin.

Photographs: (L-R) The original Winter Haven Library and the 1955 library. Photographs courtesy of Historic Winter Haven. Inset: The newest Winter Haven Public Library, constructed in 2003-2004. PCHA file photo.