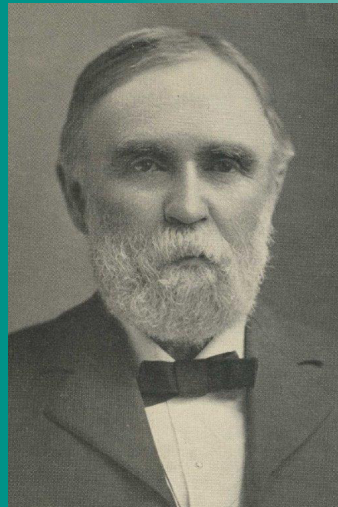




*Historical Sketch of the*  
**Peoria  
Public  
Library**



**Faces, Books, People**

*Original text by William W. Bryan, 1888*  
*Revised by Trisha Noack, 2005, 2014*







Library service in Peoria dates back 150 years for it was in 1855 that it started. Not one library, but two. The Peoria Mercantile Library on October 22, and the Peoria Library on November 8. Two clergymen were the moving spirits.

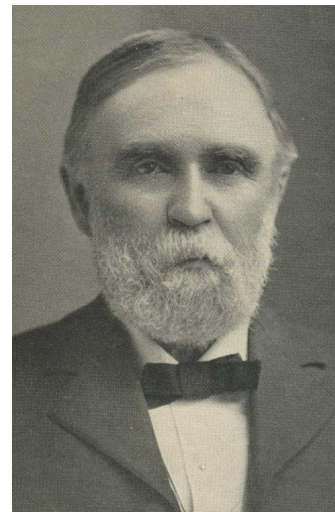
E.S. Willcox, in a historical sketch given at the dedication of a new building on February 11, 1897, stated: "One naturally inquires why two separate libraries were started here at the same time. It was a question, I am told, between the so-called liberals and the orthodox incited by the evil one himself, we might suppose. But mark how 'There's a divinity that shapes out ends, Rough-hew them how we will.' (*Hamlet*)

"I doubt if the most cunning ingenuity could have contrived a more effective plan for starting a library in a small town, as Peoria then was, than by fanning just such a hot rivalry between opposing technological forces. The old town was stirred from end to end; everybody took sides and joined in; everybody brought books, or money, to his favorite library; and, as a consequence, when a year later the two libraries were very sensibly consolidated under the name of the Peoria City Library, they had as choice a collection of some 1,500 volumes as probably any young library ever had in a city of our then size. And the gratifying thing about it all is that since the day when the two libraries were brought together under one roof there has never been any trouble; not an unkind word has passed between John Calvin and Joseph Priestly, disciple of Servetus; not a sour look between Jonathan Edwards and William Ellery Channing, although they have stood there on our shelves, elbow to elbow, for upwards of forty years."

In 1857 still another library was started. This was the German Library Association, founded with a nucleus of 100 volumes donated by the Peoria Liederkranz.

These libraries were what were commonly called "subscription" libraries and members paid an annual subscription that entitled them to free use of the libraries' reading rooms, for generally books were not then lent for home reading.

The Civil War was a period of adversity for all cultural and educational organizations and this was true of the Peoria City Library. However, after the Civil War it came under the influence of a group of



*E.S. Willcox*

young men, was reorganized, and moved to new quarters at Main and Jefferson, with E.S. Willcox, a businessman, one of the leading spirits. Mr. Willcox's name comes to the fore again and again from then on and he continued to play a leading role in Peoria Library growth until his death in 1915.

The law permitting the establishment of public libraries, free to all residents of the municipality, permitting tax support and outlining how they should be governed, was passed in 1872 by the Illinois Legislature. This was the first comprehensive library law in the United States and was eventually copied by 47 other states. The provisions were written by E.S. Willcox. For some years Chicago Public Library authorities argued that they were authors of the bill although finally admitting the Willcox bill was the one passed in the legislature and approved by the Governor.





In 1878 the Peoria Mercantile Library with E.S. Willcox as Librarian, constructed a new building at the site of the previous library, Main and Jefferson, where the Becker Building, previously the site of the Lehman Building, now stands.

In 1880 Peoria, following the lead of other cities, took advantage of the law authored by Mr. Willcox, and the Peoria Public Library was established. The first location was at Adams and Fulton, where second floor rooms were rented. The Thomas K. Thomas Illinois Central College, (formerly the site of the World Drug Store building) presently occupies this site.

Two months after the public library opened its doors, the German Library Association gave its book collection to the Peoria Public Library and a year later the Peoria Mercantile Library also donated its book collection and leased the library rooms at Main and Jefferson to the Peoria Public Library at \$1000 per year.



*Fred J. Soldan*

The first librarian appointed was Fred J. Soldan, a German Immigrant and library assistant at the St. Louis Public

Library. A knowledgeable and able librarian, friendly and popular, he greatly increased both the book collection and the use made of it. He was taken ill after a ride to Washington and returned with other members of the Peoria Bicycle Club in late October 1891 and died of pneumonia on November 5th at age 39. E.S. Willcox was appointed to replace him.

Three years later, in June 1894, three lots in the one hundred block of Northeast Monroe were purchased by the City of Peoria for a new library location. On December 24, 1894, the Peoria Mercantile Library sold its property at Main and Jefferson for \$75,000 and donated the proceeds, less \$12,000 still owed on a mortgage, to the City of Peoria for a public library building.

The design and construction of the new building were under the supervision of a committee of six men, three from the board of the Peoria Public



Library and three from the Peoria Mercantile Library, then existing in name only. They must have been an astute group, for the building which did so well for almost 70 years cost only \$67,852.34. It was dedicated and opened for service on February 11, 1897.

Originally the building was designed with the library on the second floor only. The first floor was designed with rooms to be rented for income-producing purposes. The Peoria School Inspectors, (as the school board was then named) occupied these for nine years. When Peoria Central High School was built, the old high school became the school board offices until this building was torn down to make room for the Interstate 74 right-of-way. The third floor was designed for use by art and scientific societ-



ies and for some years was used by the Peoria Art and Medical Societies.

The new library building was large for a city of about 50,000 persons. The planners had “no little thoughts.” Of the five decks of book stacks at the rear, only two were equipped with shelving, at the time of construction. The fifth level was not installed until the 1930s. A children’s room was opened on the first floor in 1910 and a business room, also on the first floor, in 1926. An education Room was organized on the third floor in 1926, but the Art Room was established before then. Thus it was almost 30 years before the front wing was used in its entirety and 40 years before the stack wing was fully used.

The library faced some set backs in the early years. E.S. Willcox died instantly in 1915 when hit by a streetcar. His successor, S. Patterson Prowse, age 64 and in ill health, died from a heart attack in the library in 1921 and Dr. Edwin Wiley, the next librarian, age 52, died suddenly in 1924.

To return to Mr. Willcox, annual reports year after year indicate that he had a fixation on book thievery. The main building was not planned to have books in the reading rooms; they were to be available from the stacks only upon signed requests. There was no entrance into the stacks from the first floor and varying floor levels in between the two wings made it next to impossible to access the other wing except from the second floor. There was certainly meant to be an entrance from the third floor, although one wasn’t added until years later. As a comparison, the present building is designed to hold over 100,000 volumes on shelves open to the public, although thievery created a need for a security system at the main entrance.

On the other hand, an unusual book collection was built in those early years, both in the Peoria Mercantile Library and later, the Peoria Public Library. I think Mr. Willcox had a strong influence here, for in his reports he mentions repeatedly the magazine subscriptions, the books on the arts, sciences, mechanics



and children’s reading. Much of what had permanent value is still in the collection, surviving two fires, one which did damage to the building and contents to the extent of \$4,500, a considerable amount for those days, almost 25% of the entire annual budget, and an earlier fire in 1888 in a bicycle club located a floor above the library rooms in the Peoria Mercantile Library.

## Dougherty Scandal

The public library was involved indirectly in a scandal of the Board of School Inspectors in the early 1900’s when the Inspectors’ offices were located on the first floor of the library building. On October 5, 1905, N.C. Dougherty, Superintendent of Schools since 1879 and Secretary of the Board of School Inspectors, was charged with embezzlement and forgery by a grand jury in thirteen indictments. At that time he was widely known as an education and school administrator having been a former president of the National Education Association. He was also president of the Peoria National Bank and known as a financier with wide land interests both locally and in western states.

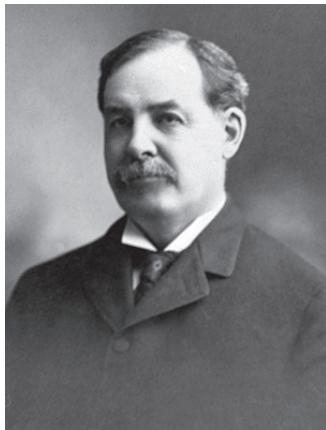
He was brought to trial on five indictments, pleaded guilty and was sentenced from 1 to 14 years at the state prison in Joliet. Upon completion of an outside audit of the school board’s books over the

previous seven years, the total amount of the defalcation was found to be \$541,000 and was believed to have started within six months of Dougherty's appointment in 1879.

The public library became directly involved when, on the night of January 6, 1907, while Mr. Dougherty was in Joliet prison, the school board safe in the library building was "blown" and the Dougherty records stolen and, it was reported, burned in the library furnace.

However, investigation afterward led to the belief that the safe had been earlier left unlocked, the Dougherty records tagged for ready identification, and the safe blown after the robbery, with waste paper stuffed in the furnace as a cover-up. Apparently it was never proven if the robbery was arranged by Dougherty, a member of his family or other persons who may have had a part in his defalcation or who were interested in a cover-up.

Mr. Dougherty was paroled after five years in prison and lived in Chicago for several years. Previous to going to prison, he had turned over property in trust to the school board to make good for what he was proven guilty of stealing. He filed suit for return of his property and, in 1912, was again indicted for forgery, tried, convicted and sentenced to an indeterminate sentence in Joliet prison. He appealed to the Illinois Supreme Court which affirmed the finding of the Peoria jury, but also recommended a pardon by the Governor which was granted.



*N.C. Dougherty*

In 1915 he moved to Greeley, Colorado where he successfully operated an 800 acre farm owned by his son Horace, served three years as President of the Colorado Farmers Congress and was serving a fourth year when he died quite suddenly in January 1922 at 78 years of age. In Greeley he was a member of the Rotary Club, Elks, active in church activities and well known as an after dinner speaker.

An interesting sidelight to the "blowing" of the library safe, and much involved in the newspaper stories, was a self-proclaimed Chicago safe-cracker named Eddie Tate who was identified as being in Peoria on January 6, 1907. He was later arrested, brought to jail in Peoria, taken ill and admitted to St. Francis Hospital. There he was kept under police guard for weeks, apparently long after recovering from his illness. One day while he and his guard were playing catch with a ball, Tate said he would like to get his hat from his room which the guard permitted, but failed to go along. Tate walked out another door.

He was arrested again in New York City and brought to Chicago, where the Police Chief refused to return him to Peoria. However, by then it was believed that, although he did have knowledge of the safe "blowing," so much of his involvement was so self-fabricated that the state's attorney believed he would not have much of a solid case. He was later convicted of another crime in Chicago and sent to Joliet prison, from which he had previously been paroled!

## Outreach Services Begin

The first extension of service outside of the main library was the placement of book collections in public schools. In later years this was extended on a contract basis to the Peoria Heights and East Peo-







### *Lincoln Branch*

ria schools. Then on March 28, 1903 a branch was opened in a Congregational Church mission school building at 2200 S.W. Washington and a branch in the new Manual Training High School was opened on October 9, 1909. The present Lincoln Branch in Lincoln Park replaced this latter branch on June 16, 1911, financed by a gift of \$20,000 from Andrew Carnegie. The gift followed Mr. Carnegie's usual condition; that is, it must be financially maintained by the city. The first branch library in a building of its own, it was dedicated and opened to public use on June 16, 1911. The Lincoln Branch was updated and remodeled in 1993 with funding of \$500,000 from the Plaedes Foundation through the generosity of Henry Slane, grandson of Henry Pindell who spearheaded the original efforts to obtain a Carnegie Library.

Mr. Willcox must also have been quite sensitive about the spelling of his name. The following was reprinted in 1944 from an earlier article under the heading: Mr. Willcox At It Again, as follows: "The editor of this paper has received another complaint from City Librarian Erastus Swift Willcox about the misspelling of his name. Wilcox Avenue has been

named after him, but the map designers and street painters have spelled the name with only one L. Mr. Willcox complains to us in his blustering way and we feel sorry for him. He even sent us a poem by his own hand.

#### *"Scribble Scribes"*

*Scribble, scribble your fill  
Scribble, scribble at your will  
But why Scribble and why spell  
Wilcox with a single "L"?*

Despite comments by Mayor Woodruff and Alderman Johnson who took interest in the correction, there had been no change in the street signs months later and no further newspaper articles were found about this mistreatment of Mr. Willcox. But Mr. Willcox would be pleased to know that now all signs along Willcox Avenue are spelled with two 'ls'."

In his later years there seems to have developed



considerable controversy over Mr. Willcox raising much editorial criticism, due to his rigidity against change and his dictatorial manner. In apparent good physical health for a person of his 85 years, although quite deaf, he continued as Librarian until

killed by a street car at the corner of Main and Glen Oak on March 30, 1915 when according to witnesses, he stepped off the curb directly in front of the street car, not hearing the warning bell.

### **1915-1921**

S. Patterson Prowse, Deputy Collector of Customs, was appointed to the library board in September, 1910. The Peoria Transcript editorialized him in this way; "a man of literary parts, an enthusiastic



bookman, a reader of ability and a writer of quality. Some of the best literary work by a Peorian is from his pen. Perhaps no man in Peoria has a finer or larger private library." Upon the death of Mr. Willcox, Mr. Prowse was apparently the only applicant considered. He was appointed librarian May 1, 1915.

Apparently the physical condition of the library building was not maintained during Mr. Willcox's later years, for various repairs were major items in board minutes for some time after Mr. Prowse's appointment.

The only change in service seems to have been the employment of a children's storyteller.

In frail health from asthma and a resultant heart condition, he died in the library immediately after the adjournment of a board meeting on December 14, 1921 at the age of 64. Mr. Prowse was also instrumental in establishing the Boy Scout movement in Peoria and Illinois Valley Yacht Club.

After the death of Mr. Prowse, the library board appointed Mrs. Anna Archer, assistant librarian, to be Acting Librarian. A survey was then conducted of public libraries of similarly sized cities and caused the conclusion that our library, in virtually all respects but the book collection, was well behind. Books were kept on closed shelves rather than openly available in the reading room, the budget was not only low but being further cut by the City, children's services were inadequate and the library lacked telephone service. The reference service was complimented "in so far as equipment and methods permitted."

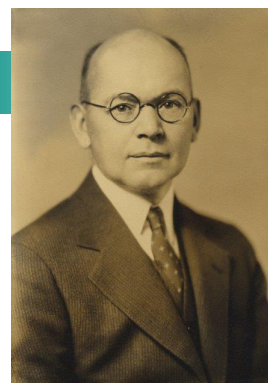


*S.P. Prowse*

from 1916 to his appointment in Peoria July 1, 1922. He had also taught English literature and written or edited several books. Although he was librarian but two short years he left a remarkable record: the rearrangement of the library from closed to open shelf, the opening of a separate periodical room, greatly improved public relations, the doubling of book circulation, making the library a center of civic and cultural activities. Apparently a man emotionally driven to work beyond his physical capacities, and of a highly sensitive nature, he was taken ill in the spring of 1924 and given leave of absence. He returned to work late in the summer, but died suddenly on October 20 at age 52.

## 1925 – 1947

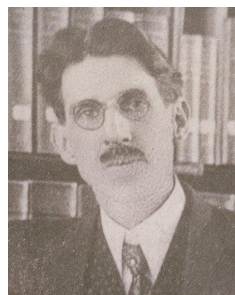
After nearly another year's search, again with Mrs. Archer as Acting Librarian, Earl W. Browning head librarian at Hamilton, Ontario, was appointed head of the Peoria Public Library as of November 19, 1925. His previous experience included head of the Jackson, Michigan and Niagara Falls, NY, public libraries.



*E.W. Browning*

During the interim there were two service additions that should be mentioned. A plan to cooperate with the Chicago Public Library and the Jacksonville School for the Blind for service for blind readers was approved. Also, service to hospital patients was approved, organized and a successful drive for books carried out. The service began within a month after the arrival of Mr. Browning.

## 1922 – 1924



*E. Wiley*

The result of this survey and a six-month search, was the appointment of Dr. Edwin Wiley on July 1, 1922 as librarian, the first trained librarian. He held a doctor of philosophy degree, experience in the libraries of several universities, as well as the Library of Congress, and most recently was head of the Naval War College Library

## Bluff Library Reading Club Has Large Enrollment



Miss Pauline Chown, assistant branch librarian at east bluff, with her class for a period of five weeks to win a gold star. Several children.

*1941 Summer Reading Club*





*McClure Branch*

Much happened within the next several years. A branch library was opened in rented quarters at the corner of Knoxville and McClure on April 19, 1926. The Business Room was established on the first floor of the Main Library on September 15, 1926, one of the earlier such services to business and industry in smaller U.S. cities. Education and Art Rooms were placed on the third floor, a Poetry and Drama Room, separate from the main reading room, was added on the second floor. Service to the Peoria Municipal Tuberculosis Sanitarium was started in March 1930. The property to the southwest of the Main Library was purchased for expansion space and this became the location of the future Audio-Visual Department.

Progress continued when property on McClure Avenue was given by the Peoria School Board for a branch library, to replace the rented East Bluff store building. The McClure Branch was formally opened January 29, 1937,

although the separate children's room in the basement was not opened until the following October.

The last major improvement during Mr. Browning's term in office was the establishment of the Willcox Branch Library at North Madison and Alexander in the former village of Averyville. Although nothing is mentioned about the political ramifications of the annexation of Averyville in board minutes of 1929,



*Willcox Branch*

or the scrapbook of newspaper clippings about the library, hearsay indicates that part of the agreement by the City to encourage a favorable referendum vote were a branch library and a high school, Woodruff. If so it was an interesting solution, one which cost the City nothing. Construction of the Willcox Branch was started in late July 1939 and opened for service July 1, 1940, with Miss Felicia Ryan, head librarian.

At the beginning of World War II great effort was devoted to the collecting and culling of gift books to be sent to the United Service Organization to provide books for G.I. reading in military establishments, with Mr. Browning as chairman for central Illinois. How many books were collected, examined for their interest to G.I.'s their physical condition, etc., does not seem to be recorded, but more than 75,000 were reported in 1943 and requests for more continued. One article mentioned the loss of such books, particularly due to merchant ships lost at sea.

Apparently one of the major problems in providing library service during the war years was staff turnover. There were continuing items about staff members joining the military service, accepting civilian war posts, marrying G.I.'s and leaving Peoria.

Mr. Browning retired in September 1947 to accept a less demanding position in North Carolina. Shortly afterward he became Executive Director of the Library Binders Institute a trade association which set up binding standards. He died at age 94. Remarkable progress and a high level of service were achieved under Mr. Browning's guidance. Following Mr. Browning's departure, Miss Ruth Montgomery, assistant librarian, was appointed acting librarian. She declined the position on a permanent basis and again a search for a new director began.

## 1948 – 1954

Xenophon Smith, Director of the U.S. Library of Congress Division for the Blind was appointed City Librarian, effective July 1, 1948. Born in Peoria,



*Xenophon Smith*

although his family moved to Chicago when he was one year old, Mr. Smith was a graduate of the University of Kansas, had business experience in Kansas and Nebraska, earned a graduate degree in library science at the University of Washington and a master's degree in audio-visual and adult education at Oregon State University. In 1940 he was appointed head of Army Library Service for the eight western states and Alaska, a position held until the end of World War II.

Mr. Smith's greatest interest must have been extension of service for he shortly began working on the establishment of a film and record service, to be located in the small library-owned building south of the main building. The Audio-Visual Department film service started March 23, 1949, and the phonograph record lending service on March 3, 1951.



*Prospect Branch*

In further extensions of service, Neighborhood Station #1 was opened at the Kroger Store at 3921 S. Adams, and later Neighborhood Station #2 was opened in a Kroger Market on Prospect Road. West Bluff Branch was opened at 1704 W. Main on July 5, 1950 and Prospect Branch replaced Neighborhood Station #2 on June 20, 1951. Both were in rented store buildings.



## Film Controversy

The film service became involved in a bitter controversy over three films which the members of the Americanism Committee of American Legion Post #2 believed were communist propaganda. The films were entitled "Brotherhood of Men," "Boundary Lines" and "Peoples of the U.S.S.R." Shortly afterward a fourth film entitled "Of Human Rights," produced by the United Nations and purchased with funds given by the Post #2 Auxiliary, was added to the other three. It concerned the then proposed human rights covenant.

Starting in 1950, at the beginning of the Korean War, and lasting into 1953 through most of the period of the McCarthy crusade against internal



*Neighborhood Station #1*

subversion, the controversy tore apart the board, staff and much of the community. The committee insisted the films should be labeled as communist propaganda and was frequently assisted by a columnist of the Peoria Star who was also a member of the committees. Other Legion posts and veteran's organizations, as well as the Peoria Jaycees, supported primarily by the Peoria Ministerial Association, members of their congregations and other individuals. However, people who publicly spoke out on either side were few.

The compromise finally accepted by the Americanism Committee and the Library Board, which satisfied neither side, was to provide public previews for all new films and to invite comments which would then be offered to those borrowing films, including the four films which caused the controversy.

Attendance at the previews was slight at the beginning and soon dropped to none at all. The previews were abandoned a year or so later.

Following the controversy consideration was given to the relocation of Willcox and West Bluff Branches, and Neighborhood Station #1 in the deep South Side. The result was the move of West Bluff Branch to







*West Bluff Branch*

University Street immediately north of Main Street on January 28, 1954 and the opening of South Side Branch at 1812 S. Griswold on May 25, 1954, both in rented store buildings. The proposed relocation of Willcox Branch was strongly opposed by people living in the branch area and was dropped by the Board. A proposed renovation of the Main Library building was not given great consideration because of the costs.

At this time there developed considerable conflict between board members and Mr. Smith concerning expenditures of the budget and personnel, with the result that Mr. Smith offered his resignation effective December 31, 1954, the end of his contract year. He also offered to leave July 1, providing he was paid for the full year, which the Board accepted. Miss Montgomery was again offered the head position and again agreed to be acting director.

William W. Bryan, was appointed Head Librarian effective February 1, 1955. His previous experi-

ence included: Head Librarian of the Scranton (Pa.) Public Library, Assistant of the Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and Assistant Librarian of Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.

Certainly the first years were uneventful, starting with a budget deficit amounting to one third of a year's income at that time. Five years passed before the deficit was eliminated, five years of spending less money than the library received. One accomplishment during these early years was the establishment of the Illinois Valley Film Cooperative in November 1958 with the public libraries of six neighboring communities; later more joined.

The cooperative agreement was that Peoria Public Library would make its film collection available to the other member libraries at cost, with the additional funds to be used for the purchase of more films.



The next major project was to achieve a new main library building to replace the one opened in 1897, which was no longer adequate for the service to be provided. Starting with a survey of the existing building, could it be satisfactorily renovated or



remodeled? Would an addition be workable? The original design had three stories but no basement under the front section, yet with ten different floor levels (where the five decks of book stacks were included and no mechanical means of moving books vertically other than two small dumbwaiters made an addition impractical.

There was also major deterioration of the foundation walls. It was obvious that costs would be great compared to achievements.

Where to locate a new library building? Having had earlier experience in moving tens of thousands of volumes, the Head Librarian's attitude was "find another good location, let's not move to temporary quarters and then back again to a new building."

There was considerable interest among a few of the board members in a location outside of the downtown area, so a trip was taken to Indiana and Michigan to investigate the location and architecture of several recently built public libraries. Taking the trip were State Senator Hudson R. Sours, a board member in favor of a location outside the central city, architect Forest A. Phillips, Director William Bryan and Assistant Director Ray Howser. Those who knew Senator Sours could readily accept that others gained greatly in knowledge in a very entertaining way about the glories of ancient Rome, and the Civil War, as they spent many hours on the highways. Whenever they visited a library, Sours would head straight for the nearest bookshelves, whether the books were fiction, general or specialized nonfiction, or children's books, much to the concern of the Director, who had in mind educating the Senator himself. Yet at the next



meeting of the Library Board, Sours recommended a central city location, giving his reasons based on his own observations.

The first choice was on the river side of the Washington Street, at Fulton. About to make a public announcement, the Library board was informed of the efforts, soon to be successful, to persuade Sears to locate its store on that site. Being in favor of Downtown redevelopment the Library Board backed away. Next a site, also on Washington between Adams and Hamilton Boulevard was chosen. It was then learned that these properties were being quietly purchased by the Caterpillar Tractor Company for its world headquarters. A short time earlier the old Mayer Hotel at Adams and Hamilton, across from the Caterpillar property, had burned. Another excellent location, except that it was being purchased by Security Saving and Loan for a high-rise office building.



*W.W. Bryan*





The knowledge of the wonderful downtown commercial redevelopment that was starting in the early 1960s before public announcement of the projects was very exciting, but it didn't help to relocate the library.

City authorities proposed a location in riverfront Eckwood Park, the building to be constructed on pillars so as to be above flood level, with a pedestrian ramp over the railroad tracks. However, investigation showed that railroad traffic, although not large in total, was quite heavy just after the end of the school day. Would children use the ramp or would they prefer the excitement of crossing the tracks?

At this point board members stated they would accept either of two locations, the site of the present building or one on Madison Street between Hamilton and Fayette. Since all bus routes but one passed the corners of Monroe and Hamilton or Monroe and Main, this was thought to be the better of the two, even though it meant moving twice. Shortly after the point of no return had been reached there was a three-month bus strike and service has never completely recovered!

The story of the referendums

and recounts for approval to issue bonds to finance the purchase of the remainder of the half-block on which the earlier building stood, construct and equip the new building, is perhaps worthy of description.

The first referendum for a bond issue of \$2,800,000 was held on April 4, 1964. Out of 20,916 votes cast, the library lost by 16 votes. A group of citizens, led by the Reverend Watts Thornburg, petitioned the court for a recount, which was held. The Library won by one vote. Another group of citizens petitioned the Court to throw out the recount; the decision was to hold another count. The Library lost by 9 votes.

The second referendum, for a bond issue of \$3,200,000 was held on April 6, 1965, which was after the annexation of the major part of Richwoods Township the City of Peoria. Out of 38,255 votes cast the library won by 2,795 votes.

In 1966 electronic voting machines were used and paper ballots not used again except for some special elections. One can't help but wonder if the recounts made a contribution to the change.





Once the problems of the locations and bond issue were overcome, few major difficulties developed. Temporary quarters in the basement and second floor of Johnson's men's clothing store at Adams and Fulton were much better than we had hoped for. Building planning went smoothly, construction and equipment bids were favorable, the building was finished on time along with an additional \$400,000 in federal funds.

As to the problem of moving twice, the solution was obvious. Delegate! Assistant Director Ray E. Howser planned and supervised the moves. The staff members were magnificent in both effort and spirit, packing cartons before the professional movers arrived on the scene, marking cartons as to delivery locations and sequence for reshelving, volunteering additional hours of work, and then working in teams with professional movers so that all books, records,



films, files, catalogs and furniture left the old building in order and were taken to the proper floor location or to storage.

The new main library building was opened for service March 23, 1968 after a brief ribbon-cutting ceremony conducted by Miss Hazel C. Wolf, President of the Library Board, Robert

J. Lehnhausen, Mayor when the project was started, and Robert G. Day, then current Mayor.

A two-level basement under the service area parking lot was added later with the federal funds. Following the completion of the new main library, a long range plan was approved by the library board, the main points being the provision of the long promised branch in the former Richwoods area and a policy of fewer and larger branches. Willcox Branch, which had been used for two years as a neighborhood library and recreation center, the latter conducted by the Park District, was closed in December 1971



*Main Library*



*Lakeview Branch*

because it was so little used. Prospect and West Bluff branches were closed August 31, 1973.

The first large branch, twice the size of the McClure Branch, previously the largest, was opened in Lakeview Park on ground leased from the Park District on September 30, 1974.

A great improvement in public library service in Illinois was the establishment of public library systems, based upon a plan of the Library Development Committee of the Illinois Library Association. Director Bryan was the first chairman of the committee and was the Association President when the plan was prepared. The state legislature approved the plan for state financed systems of public libraries with very few revisions, and the Illinois Valley System, and others, were established in 1965. Peoria Public Library became the headquarters library, providing administration and office space, both at the expense of the system. As the system grew in size, including academic and special libraries, and services, the need for full time administration became necessary. The author of this sketch withdrew as Director and Ray E. Howser, then Assistant Director of both the library and the system, became full time Director of the system. In 1977 the system moved its administrative office to Bradley University Library and in 1979 to a purchased building in Pekin. On July 4, 1994, four systems merged to form the Alliance Library System. The 13,926 square mile system moved to new headquarters in East Peoria, Illinois in 2004.

### Innovations Change Library Service

In December of 1974 William Bryan retired as Director of Peoria Public Library and his successor, then the Assistant Director Alexander C. Crossman, Jr., was appointed to replace him. Director William Bryan closed his career at Peoria Public Library by being named "Director Emeritus" in January 1976. It was a fitting honor for the many expansions and changes made by Bryan during his years as director. With so many great things accomplished, a new library building built, a new large branch established and a library system launched, the Peoria Public Library was able to concentrate on offering excellent service to the City of Peoria. In the 1970's that meant catching the first wave of computer technology.



*A.C. Crossman*

As the computer age was dawning, Peoria Public Library was ready for innovation. In February of 1975 the library adopted the use of "Tattle-tape" to improve security. "Tattle-tape" is placed in materials as they are processed for public use and removing an item from the library without checking it out sets off an alarm, much like the department store anti-theft systems. At the same time new processes were being



put in place for security, the very first discussion of computerized book circulation – or usage of an electronic catalog – were held.

By September of 1975 discussions of establishing a Northwest Branch of Peoria Public Library were first reported just one year after Lakeview Branch began operation. With the continued northern growth of the city and the length of time it took to establish Lakeview Branch the need for another branch was already obvious. Thirty years later a Northwest Branch has yet to be built.

In August of 1977, Peoria Public Library agreed to help Illinois Central College by providing space for classes to be held heralding the advent of easy access to continuing education downtown.

The year 1980 marked the Centennial of Peoria Public Library and a banquet was held to honor the 100 year anniversary of the Peoria Public Library. It was also the year the famous author Madeleine L'Engle visited Peoria Public Library. Later that year the library took another step forward when the board approved the OCLC link, the very first of the computerized cataloging systems. In December of 1983 the Peoria Public Library celebrated yet another important anniversary. This month marked the 100th anniversary of Peoria Public Library as a federal document depository. This unique resource proves to be of benefit to everyone from business people to hunters looking for topographical maps. To this day, Peoria Public Library has one of the most complete collection of patents gazettes in the state. During this same time period more updated systems were being added to the library, keeping up with the latest in library technology. In October of 1984 a new computerized circulation system, Automated Library Information System, was introduced and by spring the automated system was used to charge and discharge materials. It has taken almost 20 years for online catalogs to fully develop and for old old paper card catalogs to be removed from the library floor, although no new materials had been added to the old card catalogs since 1997.

## 1985- 2005

Yet another famous visitor graced the doors of Peoria Public Library when on June 17, 1985 Barbara Bush, wife of President George Bush, stopped in.

By 1986 the Library Board had moved ahead

with planning the expansion of Lakeview Branch, a location that receives almost as much business as the Downtown Library. Plans were approved January 17, 1986 and groundbreaking was July 28.

In the interim however, Library Director Alex Crossman died quite suddenly. After a short search, the first woman director of Peoria Public Library was appointed.

Margareth Gibbs began her term on October 17, 1986, a position she held until April 1992. On January 26, 1987, the McClure Branch Library celebrated its 50th anniversary and entered a second half-century of service to the East Bluff neighborhoods of Peoria.



*M. Gibbs*

Eight years later in 1995 the branch underwent a remodeling and celebrated its fresh look with an open house.

Those areas that do not have easy access to a library location often receive service through a bookmobile. It is unclear when the first bookmobile took to the road, but the library archives contain early photos of a “book wagon,” as yet unidentified. The book truck in use since 1970 was replaced on July 14, 1987 with a new bookmobile.

On November 16, 1989 the clerical and custodial staff of the library unionized and after two years were able to ratify a contract. Later the librarians and reference assistants joined the union as well.

## Overcoming Challenges

A minor disaster hit the Downtown Library on April 11, 1988 when a malfunctioning sprinkler went on at 4:15 in the men's restroom and flooded the entire second floor, soaking newly installed carpeting in the children's room. The library closed but was able to reopen the next morning. That same year, in September, security cameras were installed downtown, bringing an additional security and safety control to the main library. One wonders if E.S. Willcox, in his

obsession with guarding the library's collection would have enjoyed checking the camera's images throughout the day for perpetrators of library crimes!

Another sprinkler disaster occurred 11 years later on January 26, 1999, when a malfunctioning sprinkler in the government documents room in the basement poured 2 inches of water into the basement on a Sunday night. US Patent Books were saved, but thousands of dollars in damage occurred. Materials belonging to the Central Illinois Landmarks Foundation were damaged and the volunteer group RSVP had to relocate its office during repair and clean up. One of the more infamous eras in library history began in 1990 when the notorious white supremacist Matt Hale, convicted in 2004 of attempting to have a federal judge murdered and sentenced to 40 years in prison, held a meeting at Peoria Public Library. On March 31, 1990 his meeting turned into a shouting match. Hale continued to hold meetings in the public meeting space of the Peoria Public Library until March 24, 2001 when his meeting caused a riot at the library. Fights broke out between Hale supporters and protestors of his "Church of the World Creator," chairs were smashed, pepper spray was released and arrests were made. Because Hale subsequently refused to pay for the damage to the library premises, a point he agreed to in the contract he signed when he reserved the room, Hale and his group were no longer allowed to use Peoria Public Library as a meeting place. Television news coverage of Hale, his followers and police in front of the Downtown Library are often used as background footage in stories about Hale and his many legal troubles. The Peoria Public Library continues to offer meeting spaces of various sizes to groups that are for educational, cultural, civic, intellectual and charitable activities or activities requiring the use of library materials.

### Internet Access Comes to the Library

Following Ms. Gibbs retirement in 1992, Sue Herring was hired as the next Director. She took charge in an era when keeping pace with technology presented an enormous challenge to both physical plants and funding. One of Ms. Herring's immediate goals was to revitalize the Friends of Peoria Public Library as a fundraising organization. They have grown into an activeresource providing thousands of dollars to support library programming and special projects.

A new age, which changed usage patterns at the library forever, dawned in November 1990 when the



*S. Herring*

first public use computers were placed in the library through a grant for Heartland Free-Net. Federal funds allowed area library patrons free access to the Heartland Free-Net, an electronic mail system through which the public could exchange information or seek answers to questions. The

Friends of Peoria Public Library purchased the first public internet accessible workstation and paid for the internet connection. It was put into operation on December 18, 1996. In August of 1997 the Peoria Public Library website opened. Eight years later the web site offers a variety of services including a way to ask reference questions, access to the library catalog on line and databases that can be used from other locations by entering a library card number. In 1998 the Peoria Public Library received a Gates Grant which added 19 public use computers at the Main Library. In 2002 a Gates State Partnership grant supplied 16 additional public access computers to the branch libraries. The demand was heavy and as the internet has changed the usage has changed. Early on, it was thought that there would be numerous locations where the public could plug into public internet, but today the Peoria Public Library, with 88 public internet computers is the only true free public access. Changing needs such as the expansion of the web, internet porn, viruses and worms have made providing public access an ongoing challenge, but the collective wisdom of libraries and computer users around the world have kept the service thriving. RiverWest Library has a computer lab that, in the spring of 2005, is available for online classes and exams for distance learning and groups in the area.



## Partnership Leads to Two New Library Locations

Peoria Public Library had been reaching out to the residents of public housing in Peoria since 1941 when the first Peoria Housing Authority properties opened. In April of 1969 at Taft Homes and in June of 1969 at Warner Homes, “study centers,” or satellite libraries were opened under the Score with Books program. Funding came from the Peoria Housing Authority and from the Library Services and Construction Act funding.

On October 15, 1997, Warner Homes, a Peoria Housing Authority Development, held a grand opening for a new study center that featured a mini-library similar to one already in operation at Taft Homes. Soon after the housing authority received a HOPE VI grant that enabled them to tear down the out-of-date and dangerous brick apartment complex built just after the Great Depression. In its place 200 homes were erected, surrounding a state-of-the-art community center with space for a library. The Peoria Public Library agreed to furnish and run the library as well as run the adjacent computer lab. The Warner Study center closed for the demolition and the RiverWest Library officially opened for business on Monday, November 4, 2002.



*South Side Branch*

In the meantime, Roger John, Executive Director of the Peoria Housing Authority was deeply concerned about the lack of convenient library service for the residents of Harrison Homes, another Depression-era complex, and Harrison Primary School, located in the middle of approximately 700 run-down apartments. The housing authority decommissioned an entire apartment building across from

Harrison School and had it gutted, handing the remaining shell over to the Peoria Public Library. It was opened on September 28, 1999 as the rebirth of the old South Side Branch, which had closed in a store front in 1993. The location was immediately used to capacity and so in 2002, the second floor was also remodeled and opened as additional space. The branch received significant help in purchasing books from Rotary International and Sam's Club.



*RiverWest Library*



## P.I.G. campaign for the Bookmobile

It was apparent in June 1999 that the bookmobile, now out of service more than on the road, had to be replaced. The solution was a fund-raising campaign modeled after Chicago's famous cows. Chicago had commissioned fiberglass cows which were painted and decorated by artists and placed about the streets. The original idea sprang from an Alliance Library System public awareness campaign. Using Peoria Is Great or P.I.G. as a theme, fiberglass pigs were ordered, companies adopted them and they were decorated and placed about Peoria. The Friends of Peoria Public Library, responsible for the campaign, raised \$175,000 along with donations such as a diesel engine from Caterpillar. The state-of-art 32 foot bus, shrink-wrapped with graphics of readers of all ages and fitted out with a beautiful and practical interior took to the road on March 18, 2002. Currently the bookmobile serves the northern half of the city, stopping at many nursing homes and day care centers along with other neighborhood stops.

In 2003, the city of Peoria was in a financial crunch and needed to downsize personnel. One solution was to offer a special early retirement package to long-time employees to encourage them to leave the employee roles. In September of 2003, Director Sue Herring who had been at the helm during exciting expansions into the internet, RiverWest Library, South

Side Branch Library, and the Bookmobile retired. In the months prior to her retirement six other longtime key staff members also retired, leading to a major shift of current staff and hiring of new personnel.

After a six-month search, Robert Black, formerly Assistant Director of the Arkansas State Library, was

hired to head Peoria Public Library. One of his first duties was to head the committee planning the 125th anniversary celebration on April 20, 2005. As the anniversary year is celebrated a new mayor, Jim Ardis will replace Mayor Ransburg. As the Peoria Public Library enters the next era, it continues to advocate for strong library service that meets community needs.

## The New Era: 2005 – 2012

After successfully celebrating 125 years of service to Peoria, the Board of Trustees and staff of Peoria Public Library faced the future. The facts were that while many efforts had been made, no movement had occurred toward creating another branch that would serve the rapidly expanding northern portion of the city. While existing buildings were in good repair, they were designed around old service models that made them staff-heavy and inefficient.

In 2005, the Board of Trustees made a decision that progress would only be made if the citizens of Peoria had a clear view of what needed to happen. Their first step was to appoint a Long Range Planning Committee that involved a diverse group of 30 members from all portions of the Peoria community. As the group was gathering data for the long-range planning process Director Robert Black resigned. In August 2006 after another search, Edward M. Szynaka was hired as Director.



*E.M Szynaka*



The Planning Committee spent more than 800 hours with consultants Himmel & Wilson as mail and internet surveys, focus groups and meetings gathered input about what the community wanted to find in their libraries. In October 2006 a draft comprehensive strategic plan to update and improve library service was released to the public. Seventy days of public meetings and input resulted in the final plan that made it clear new and remodeled buildings were key to implementing improved and cost-effective service. One outcome of public input was that McClure Branch was slated for renovation instead of closure. Because it sits in a flood plain, the building could not be expanded and also was very close to Lakeview Branch. However, Peorians requested that it remain.

In January 2007, the City Council agreed to place an advisory referendum on the April 2007 ballot. A volunteer committee “Libraries for All” was formed and raised more than \$100,000. A campaign was launched to pass the advisory referendum.

On April 17, 2007, the citizens of Peoria voted 72%, the highest positive library vote in the history of Illinois, in favor to advise the City Council to issue \$35 million in bonds to fund the library capital program. By July, the Library Board began to search for firms to conduct a Building Program Services Plan for a Multi-Building Library Project and Site Selection services. In November that year, Farnsworth Group was chosen to provide Site Selection Services and Burnidge Cassell Associates/Library Planning



*McClure Branch*



Associates were selected to provide Building Program services.

While planning work was being done for new buildings, work on upgrading library service was already well under way. In December of 2007, Peoria Public Library and Alliance Library System began the massive switchover to the new RSACat. This new online catalog provided swift and dramatic changes to patrons' access to materials. By February, a presentation was made of the North Branch draft site selection plan at a public meeting.

In April 2008, the Board voted to choose final plans to present to the City Council and it took until June for the





*Lakeview Branch*

City Council to issue \$28 million in bonds for the Library Capital Program, after eliminating money to remodel Lakeview Branch. Shortly thereafter, the Library Board voted to purchase six acres in Medina Plains Corporate Park as a building site for the North Branch after professional investigations revealed that all empty buildings available for reuse are either too large, in the wrong place, or too expensive to repurpose into a branch library.

The City of Peoria issued the bonds in August 2008 and, in November, Farnsworth Group and Burnidge Cassel Associates were chosen as architects for the Main Library and North Branch projects. A month later the same group also won the contract for the Lincoln Branch project.

In recognition of the leadership exhibited during the campaign and beginning of the building project, the Alliance Library System awarded the “Trustee of the Year” award to the entire Library Board of Trustees.

Due to the fact that Lincoln Park was the site of Peoria’s first cemetery which was closed in the 1880s, an archaeological report was requested and received in January of 2009. City records showed that the cemetery was cleared shortly after it was officially



*Lincoln Branch*





closed, and it was known that the tombstones that remained unclaimed were recycled and used as building materials in the surrounding neighborhood.

Contracts with architects were signed in April 2009, and on June 9, 2009, the City Council added Lincoln Branch, a Carnegie Library, and Lincoln Park to the list of Peoria's official historic landmarks. In June, archaeologists found over 300 burial indicators in the footprint of the proposed Lincoln Branch expansion.

As the calendar turned to July, intense preparation for building began. Public meetings were held to gather comments on North Branch and Main Library preliminary plans. At the same time, announcements went



*North Branch*



out that meeting rooms would not be available to the public after September 2009 as materials were moved to Main Library Lower Level Two in preparation for construction.

The first groundbreaking of the project was held on September 10, 2009 at the Peoria Public Library North Branch at 3001 West Grand Parkway. On the windy prairie, backed by the highway, trustees and other guests celebrated the beginning of construction with gold shovels that would be saved and used at each site. In October, Midwest Archaeological Research Services completed field investigations of City Cemetery at Lincoln Branch. On October 30, a

groundbreaking was held at Main Library on a rainy day that drove attendees to crowd under umbrellas and the awning that had been erected. Trustees tossed shovelfuls of dirt from one of the planter squares as all other nearby surfaces were still paved.

On November 12, 2009, the Main Library parking lot closed and the front stair tower demolition began. By December 9, the Main Library audiovisual collections had been moved to other locations. Other materials continued to move to Lower Level Two and on January 19, 2010, the Main Library opened "Essential Services" on Lower Level Two with patrons accessing the area through a new entrance that lead directly downstairs. Essential Services had some pop-



ular fiction and new books on shelves for browsing, a few stand-up public computers and staff were available to retrieve holds or materials from the temporary stacks where all other materials were stored.

On January 25, 2010, the Local History and Genealogy Room opened in its temporary location at the WTVP building. As Local History and Genealogy were a unique and popular service it was decided to make sure these materials were easily available. The move also provided the opportunity to review the collection.

The City Council approved the Certificate of Appropriateness for Lincoln Branch on May 3, 2012 and, on July 9, a ground-breaking was held. In order to not disturb any possible burial features, confetti is used rather than dirt for the ceremonial groundbreaking.

By November, the main and second floors of Main Library were complete and the building was closed to the public in order to move materials back to those upper floors. The two floors quietly reopened to the public on December 13, 2010, and on January 7, 2011, the Local History and Genealogy Room at WTVP closed for the move back to Main Library.

On February 19, 2011, McClure Branch closed for construction. By March 15, 2011, the Local History and Genealogy Room opened at Main Library with temporary limited hours until the Grand Opening of Main Library.

At last, on May 14, 2011, the first of five Grand Openings was held. The Peoria Public Library North Branch opened on May 14, 2011 to huge crowds and long lines at the self-check out stations. Even a pouring rain did not stop enthusiastic library visitors and the staff began handing out free heavy plastic library tote bags to protect checked out materials from the downpour. One month later, on June 11, 2011, Main Library officially opened all four



*Main Library*





public floors with a Grand Opening that also drew a large crowd. United States Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood, spoke briefly at the ceremony.

On December 10, 2011, Lincoln Branch opened both the new 12,000 square foot addition and the restored Carnegie portion of the building to rave reviews just six months after the 100th anniversary of the opening of the original building. On January 7, 2012, McClure Branch held a Grand Opening just one day short of the 75th anniversary of its original opening. At last, on April 28, Lakeview Branch reopened its doors to the public.

With all five buildings remodeled, restored, enlarged or newly built and the latest technologies in library service, energy efficiency and building design in place, library usage has increased by 40% over 2009 levels. New systems are so efficient that no staff has been added, although the building program added almost 50,000 square feet including an entire new branch. As the building program ends in 2012, the citizens of Peoria are making good use of the bountiful resources available at Peoria Public Library.



booking meeting rooms, checking out materials and filling programs. By the time the buildings had all been open for one year, in May of 2013, Peorians and people from the surrounding area were visiting the various locations for books, programs, meeting rooms, computers and to use the free wi-fi. With conveniences such as power outlets on study tables, self-check stations, enticing children's areas, the quick service of holds pickup and checkout, local library users flocked back to using the library.

The increased programming for children in exciting spaces like the Lincoln Branch Hot Air Balloon

## New Buildings, New Challenges



*L. Johnson*

With five newly expanded, restored or constructed buildings at last ready to serve the population of Peoria, the staff and Board opened the doors and began collecting data to see what worked and what didn't. Under a new Library Director, Leann Johnson, who took the reins after the departure of Ed Szynaka in November 2012, the Peoria Public Library began to

settle into new ways of doing business, always with a watchful eye on what was working and what wasn't.

The city took to the new facilities with alacrity,







during these years the popularity of downloading ebooks from the Peoria Public Library tripled. During the holiday season of 2011, ereaders such as the Kindle and the Nook suddenly became affordable and in the early part of 2012, the library was inundated with requests for assistance with these new devices. The staff scrambled to learn how to use all the various devices and quickly launched a series of classes to handle the demand of those who had ereaders. The Friends of Peoria Public Library then purchased a selection of devices so those attending the class could decide which device suited them best. Peoria Public Library,

Room, the North Branch Bee Hive, the main level Children's Room at Main Library and the Lakeview Branch parklike storytime room provided a free, educational yet fun outlet for Peoria's families. Summer Reading programs continued to be one of the highlights of the library year, and an experiment was tried that let families register and check in each week for Summer Reading hours online from home, but the system proved to not provide the challenge to children that reporting reading hours at the library did. Summer Reading parties were held at the Peoria Zoo in 2012 and 2013. In 2014 the Summer Reading program returned to a system of having all Summer Readers come to their favorite branch and sign their paper contract each week. Numbers boomed with 5,585 people of all ages participating and then enjoying an end of season party at the new Peoria Riverfront Museum. The number of readers and the 1,385 party-goers who came to the museum broke all previous participation records.

While online Summer Reading was not popular,

already a part of the Alliance Digital Media Library operated by Overdrive Media which shared resources across the old Alliance Library System, quickly added more items available only to Peoria Public Library patrons to try to handle the demand. In 2014 the State Library added a program called E-Read Illinois,



powered by Axis 360, and designed to make digital books more accessible across the state. Peoria Public Library added that collection as well. By 2014 almost





every branch had a staff member who could provide “tech” appointments with members of the public who wanted to understand how to use their device with the library ebook systems.

At the same time Tumblebooks Library added Tumblebooks Cloud and Audio Cloud. These digital resources were not downloadable but could be viewed on any device over the internet through the library website. Tumblebooks in this way can be shown to classrooms as well as viewed by individuals and with the focus on children’s materials, was very popular with teachers in the city as well as parents.

In 2013, Peoria Public Library and Peoria School District 150 signed an Intergovernmental Agreement that outlined ways in which the schools and library could work together. Main points of the agreement were that all teachers who lived outside the city could obtain a special “teacher card” to use for classroom materials and to access online databases with their students. In addition, Librarians would be available as support for the school library staffs throughout the district and schools would be paired with various library locations. In 2014, the agreement was expanded to provide library cards for students who lived outside the city boundaries but attend District 150 schools, giving them equal access to Peoria Public Library resources. In fall of 2014, the Bookmobile schedule included stops at nine District 150 schools.

The recent years were also the time of the social media explosion for the library, with many patrons preferring to receive library news via various social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Peoria Public Library, in the fall of 2014 was actively maintaining all these accounts as well as Google+ and a page for the Local History and Genealogy Room that featured many historic photos of Peoria in days gone by.

Strong partnerships with a variety of local arts organizations as well as The Peoria Historical Society and The Central Illinois Landmark Foundation provide a continual source of exciting and interesting displays for the Gallery, also creating interactions with the public through social networking.

In 2014, as The Peoria Public Library prepares to celebrate its 135th anniversary in the next year, the building project finished in 2012 can again point to a remarkable victory. The Peoria Public Library Lincoln Branch Carnegie Building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in May, adding the honor to the local landmark designation received before construction began. In August, the Peoria Public Library McClure Branch was honored by the City and given local landmark status. So, the Peoria Public Library perches on the edge of another major anniversary able to claim a strong presence both for its history and its cutting edge library service.





Peoria  
Public  
Library

[www.peoriapubliclibrary.org](http://www.peoriapubliclibrary.org)