

History of NKCP (1939-1964)

In 1927, Myra D. Cotter (1896-1990) was elected the first president of North Kansas City's Parent-Teacher Association. Mrs. Cotter and members of the P.T.A.'s newly-formed children's reading committee lobbied civic clubs for the next seven years about a library for North Kansas City. At one point during their campaign the organization wrote a letter to the Carnegie Foundation inquiring about having a Carnegie library built in North Kansas City, but the effort never materialized for unknown reasons.

Edward A. Hecker (1888-1968), North Kansas City mayor from 1931 to 1943, was strongly in favor of a public library. In 1934, the P.T.A.'s children's reading committee approached the mayor about a local library. He appointed a committee chaired by Chamber of Commerce President Harry Brunner to see if there was any interest in the idea.

About the same time, the Chamber of Commerce appointed its own committee to investigate the possibility of offering a library service to North Kansas City. In September 1935, 23 people attended the first committee meeting. The group adopted bylaws and became known as the North Kansas City Library Association. Any resident of the North Kansas City School district could become a member of the Association by paying yearly dues of \$1.00.

The Association agreed that anyone who joined between October 1936 and October 1937 would be considered a charter member. The committee's membership increased to 201 people over the next year. They also asked the community for donations of books to start the library. People throughout the city donated 1,237 books for the Library.

The North Kansas City School Board agreed to house the public library in a corner of the high school library. Verna Nistendirk (1907-1999) was the North Kansas City High School librarian from 1929 until about 1938. She helped select and catalog new books, and catalog the books donated to the public library. She later moved to Florida where she worked for the state library.

The North Kansas City Library opened to the public on October 17, 1936. The collection featured 1,455 books. The Library was open from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The high school and public library books were interfiled, so there was no way to maintain separate card registration or circulation statistics.

The public library's location in the high school library soon proved impractical. The committee approached the City Council again, and a plan was designed to build a facility with two reading rooms, an auditorium with a stage, and an outdoor swimming pool. The land was donated by the North Kansas City Development Company. The Library-Lecture Hall & Swimming Pool proposal was easily approved by voters in a bond election. The final construction costs were \$70,000.

Harry Brunner was appointed president of the Library's first board. Myra D. Cotter was also a charter member of the Board. Margaret Hodge, wife of Dr. Russell Hodge and mother of Dr. Robert Hodge, was the Board's first vice-president.

The North Kansas City Library and Recreational Building was dedicated on January 18, 1939. More than 300 people attended the ceremony. The original Library was located where the children's area are found in the present-day building. The Library was open four mornings, five afternoons, and three nights a week. A play area for children ages 2 to 6 years old was opened in the basement. The room included toys, such as a rocking horse and a wooden train set. Library fines were one-cent per day overdue, per item.

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The first librarian at the new Library was Ida Rosemyrl Feedback (1908-1989). She was born Rosemyrl Grover in Iowa and raised in Ohio. She graduated from The University of the City of Toledo (Ohio) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1930, and in 1932 from Western Reserve University with a Bachelor of Science in Library Science. Ms. Feedback relocated to Kansas City for a position with the Kansas City Public Library. She was the Westport Branch's children's librarian from July 1935 to May 1937. Ms. Feedback resigned in May 1937 to marry, but continued working as a substitute clerk at the branch until December 1938. She was hired as Library Director in December 1938 by the North Kansas City Council, who agreed to pay her a salary of \$100 a month. The Library Board also persuaded the City Council to invest \$500 in general reference books and an additional \$500 for business reference books.

The City also hired a "Mr. Williams" as custodian for the Library and auditorium, as well as a life guard and manager of the swimming pool. The Federal Works Progress Administration provided the Library with three employees, including a "daily assistant" named Ruby Reece.

In the Library's first month only 747 books were checked out and 107 new patron registered for Library cards. The new Library's collection included only 50 children's picture books. Within five months, the number had increased to 419. The Library's overall collection size increased to nearly 4,000 books in the first year. Ms. Feedback began a summer reading program, called the "Vacation Reading Club." Children who read 12 books received a diploma; children who read 16 books received a diploma with a gold seal.

Ms. Feedback also began the Library's first story hour--held on Saturday mornings--in March 1940. The book read at the Library's first story hour was Walt Disney's "Pinocchio." Sixty-one children were in attendance. As the story hour attendance grew, so did the interest of the parents of the children. Despite the initially slow start, library cards were issued to over 1,000 people and 12,000 books were checked out in the Library's first year. On September 9, 1940, table tennis and other activities were added to the recreation rooms in the Library basement.

The Library construction plan failed to provide funds for books and the Board had to appeal to the City Council every six months or so for additional money. While many local organizations donated books to the new Library, they were not enough to meet the community's need. Mayor Hecker recommended that the Board go to the public for an operating and materials fund. On April 5, 1941 voters approved a library levy of 3½ cents per \$100 assessed valuation.

The Library had their books catalogued and processed at a central processing facility called the Library Service Center of Missouri.

In December 1942 the Library and other public buildings were ordered closed at noon on Saturdays to conserve fuel for the war.

Mrs. Feedback resigned in November 1944 and had her first child in December. She relocated with her family to Springfield, Missouri, in 1951.

In 1945, Frances Wuest (1899-1979) became the new librarian. She was born Frances Campbell in Kansas City and graduated from Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia, with a degree in English in 1921. She worked for the Kansas City Public Library as branch manager of their Swope Branch between 1921 and 1931.

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While employed with the Missouri Library Commission, Mrs. Wuest (then known as Frances Davidson) was responsible for successfully leading the first campaign to establish a tax-supported library in Missouri with the creation of the Platte County Library in 1941. Mrs. Wuest later took a one-year leave of absence from North Kansas City Public Library in January 1947 until October 1948 to establish another tax-supported public library in Texas County, Missouri. While she was on leave, Mrs. Ecu K. Miller was the interim director.

In 1949, the Library increased its hours to 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturday. By the early 1950's, the North Kansas City Public Library had outgrown its original building. As early as 1951 the City Council gave the Library permission to use a room in the basement of City Hall. Due to inadequate funding, the Library even discussed charging rental fees for books. In April 1952, voters approved an increase in the library levy to 10 cents per \$100 assessed valuation.

In the spring of 1954 the Library was checking out 11,000 books each month and owned 15,000 volumes. Every two weeks classes from the lower elementary schools visited the Library. The Library began a plan to remodel and expand to accommodate the growth in May 1954. The auditorium was converted into an a third reading room which provided shelving space for an additional 8,000 books. The circulation desk was expanded, and new furniture purchased for the Library. The renovations were completed in November 1954 and cost \$11,000.

In 1955, the YMCA vacated the Library's basement where they had leased office space since 1946. The Library agreed to allow the Board of Education to occupy the basement until their new office space was complete.

As the Library grew, Mrs. Wuest enlarged the staff. In August 1959, a bookkeeper was hired. In April 1963, the Library hired a second trained librarian, Edna Gatton (1910-1992). She had a Master's degree in Library Science from the Kansas State Teacher's College in Emporia, Kansas, and had been a librarian in Pierce City, Kansas. Frances Wuest had an area enclosed for an office in January 1961.

In the early 1960's, the Library began to utilize some new technology. The Library purchased its first photocopy machine in August 1961. Gaylord charging machines were leased by the Library for \$50 a year beginning in January 1963.

In November 1963, the Library's accounting services were transferred to the City Clerk's Office. Until the mid-1960's North Kansas City Public Library was one of only three libraries in Clay County, along with those in Liberty and Excelsior Springs. During the decade between 1956 and 1965 the North Kansas City Library led the state in per capita circulation every year. Annual circulation peaked in 1964 at nearly 250,000 more than Joplin, Missouri, and almost three times more than St. Joseph, Missouri.