

After 125 years, library looks to past, present and future

COLIN HUNTER
RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER

As he strolls between the book-lined shelves of his former workplace, retired librarian Lynn Matthews is amazed by two things:

First, how much has changed over the years at the Kitchener Public Library.

Second, how much hasn't changed at all.

"I remember all the programs we introduced, all the improvements," reminisces Matthews, who retired in 1993 after 20 years as chief librarian.

"But that work is still happening today, just the way it should be. Kitchener has a terrific library – it has always been terrific."

Though many of the younger employees don't recognize him, long-time library staffers rush over to Matthews for handshakes and hugs. Eighty-year-old Matthews celebrated a landmark birthday this year. And so, too, did the library.

This past week marks the 125 anniversary of a lending library in Kitchener, although its earliest incarnation in 1884 bore almost no resemblance to the present-day institution.

Children were forbidden from the library in those days. The handful of employees spent most of their hours behind steel bars, except when they emerged to shoo a boorish drunk or rap a sleeping patron with a wooden ruler.

Over the century that followed its opening, the library transformed from a somewhat exclusive club to a free repository of information open to every citizen of Kitchener.

Matthews was at the helm when Kitchener was named the 'Library Capital of Canada' by the Toronto Star in 1975 – an accolade that still brings a smile to his face.

When the library celebrated its centennial anniversary in 1984, Matthews penned a memorial booklet called "Your Library Heritage." In it, he wrote: "We are proud of our long tradition of service, appreciative of those who have gone before us and are determined to provide high standards of service for our community in this, our second century."

That sentiment still rings true, he says, even though the intervening years since he wrote it have brought drastic changes to the library.

The Internet was barely an idea when Matthews reached the end of his tenure, but doomsayers were warning even then that information technology would render libraries obsolete.

Such prognostications have proven wrong, since library membership and usage are higher in 2009 than ever before.

Just shy of 100,000 local residents now hold library cards, as compared to 87,000 only five years ago. Those members have access to roughly 607,000 items – a whopping figure compared to the roughly 600 volumes it housed when it first opened.

Just as during the Great Depression and every recession that followed, library usage has spiked in the wake of the economic downturn of 2009.

“Libraries are alive and thriving, and recession has demonstrated the true value of libraries in a community,” says Sonia Lewis, chief executive officer of KPL. “People look to the library for information and entertainment, and job hunters look for assistance building a resume or to use the Internet access. Our services are in really high demand.”

Current statistics illustrate that, far from fading into irrelevance, libraries are busier and more important now than at any time in their past.

But to understand where the Kitchener Public Library is headed, it is helpful to know where it has been.

Decades before anything resembling a modern library opened in the city, a mechanics institute opened in Kitchener (then Berlin) in 1854. Squeezed into the stuffy basement of the town hall, the institute was only open Saturday mornings and the annual borrowing fee was one dollar.

Following the passage of the Free Libraries Act of 1882, Berlin council voted in favour of creating a free public library. In April 1884, a book collection boasting 3,000 volumes and a reading room stocked with dozens of newspapers and periodicals opened to the public.

In 1908, the library became the first in Ontario to be run by a full-time chief librarian – a woman named Mabel Dunham, who was somewhat legendary both for her progressive thinking and antiquated tactics.

Dunham was the prototypical stern librarian, quick to shush noisemakers and poke a bony finger into the shoulder of anyone caught dozing off.

But Dunham was largely responsible for turning the library into the indiscriminately welcoming institution it is today. She was the first to open the library’s doors to children, and on April 5, 1924, she explained her motivations in a front-page column in *The Daily Record*:

“When the library was first organized,” she wrote, “children were not even tolerated in the institution. One of the duties of the janitor was to keep them out, together with dogs and drunks. I can remember very well being turned away on one occasion because I was not yet 12 years of age. I should not like any children ... to feel toward the library as I did on that unhappy day.”

After Dunham retired in 1944, Dorothy Shoemaker took the helm for 27 years and led the library through a post-war explosion of growth.

On May 23, 1962, the library unveiled its new headquarters – the 69,000-square-foot main branch on Queen Street, which has built at a cost of \$756,000.

A librarian named Brian Dale followed Shoemaker for barely a year as head librarian, and then was replaced by Matthews, who had previously worked at libraries in Toronto and Saskatchewan.

“It was a very exciting time to come to this community,” Matthews recalls. “The population was growing, but something else was happening. With the universities and the college, people wanted a very strong library system.”

Under Matthews' guidance, the library opened the Grace Schmidt Room of Local History, a trove of information named for the assistant chief librarian who worked under Matthews for many years. Matthews also oversaw the opening of the first branches of the public library in Chicopee, Forest Heights and Pioneer Park.

Matthews was in charge during the technological boom of the 1980s, and was instrumental in bringing the earliest computer to the library in 1984.

Some patrons, especially older ones, viewed the computer as a mere fad and continued using the trusty, dusty card catalogue system.

A year later, however, library staff removed the clunky old cabinets housing the card catalogue, and "we had a celebration that day," chuckles Matthews.

Matthews knew technology would forever change how libraries worked, but he didn't believe computers would replace libraries.

"The fear-mongers said libraries wouldn't last, that they were old-fashioned and that they would be taken over by computers," remembers Matthews. "But that talk diminished as circulation and memberships kept going up."

Even today, as the Internet is available in practically every home, school and workplace, the Kitchener Public Library continues to thrive.

The library offers free wireless access, online accounts for searching and reserving materials, and nearly 12,000 eBooks available for download.

Use of the library's online products jumped a full 60 per cent from 2007 to 2008, and overall circulation increased by 12 per cent.

"Libraries are evolving," says 16-year-old Danya Milne, a Cameron Heights student and member of the library's Youth Advisory Committee.

"The library provides a safe environment for youth to hang out with friends and get involved in a variety of free after school activities, such as Wii tournaments and Yoga classes."

Dan Carli, chair of the local public library board, says the library has managed to adapt to the times rather than get overtaken by them.

"People think the Internet is taking over, but it's quite the opposite, actually," says Carli. "The Internet has not been a detriment to the library, but rather I think it has enhanced the library."

While keeping up with technology is integral to the long-term survival of a library, so too is staying true to its core ideals of free information for everyone, Carli says.

"A public library is a great equalizer in a community," he says. "It doesn't stop you at the door and ask where you came from. It levels the playing field for everyone. Information is powerful, and by leveling the playing field it makes information available to all."

There is more change afoot at the Kitchener Public Library, with a \$40-million expansion and renovation project slated to begin construction next summer.

The project will see a 25,000-square-foot expansion built onto the back of the library, a redesign of the current interior and, later, the construction of a 400-space parking garage jointly funded by the city, region and province.

Though he has been happily retired for 16 years, Matthews often wonders what the future holds for the institution where he spent what he calls the best years of his working life.

“The library will always be important,” he says, strolling through the non-fiction stacks. “A public library has been called ‘the people’s university,’ and that’s the best description I know of.”

chunter@therecord.com