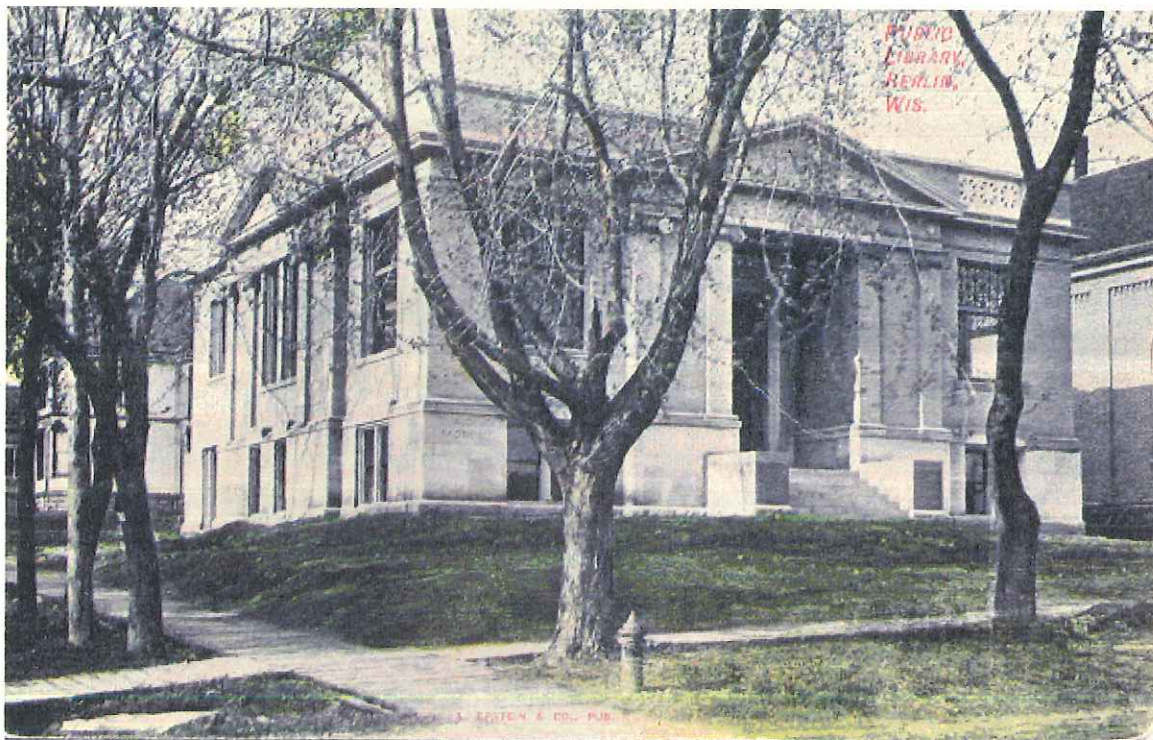


# Celebrating a Century of Service



**Berlin Public Library  
1903-2003**

*'Open to All'*

# *Open to All*

## **A History of the Berlin Public Library**

**1903-2003**

*Celebrating a Century of Service*

**Roberta A. Erdmann**

**Historian**

**Author**

**2003**

## Celebrating a Century of Service – Berlin Public Library

Books and the printed word were important to those men and women who pushed west to settle the lands of this vast continent, including the tiny band of residents of Strong's Landing. These earliest settlers shared their supply of books with each other. As their numbers grew so did that supply. Misters Vedder and Safford started a circulating library in 1859. From the start they looked for a common place to store their volumes. Businesses such as Brunsmann's; Miner's Book Store; and even a doctor's office for a time, provided that space.

A Library Association was formed in 1868. They held a lecture series to raise money for a library. While the series was successful no surplus money was raised so the members subscribed \$400 to buy more books. This collection was housed in an upstairs room in the Field block in the Grand Army of the Republic's meeting room. Then in 1887, the collection went to the Berlin Public High School. That proved to be an unsatisfactory spot because the school wasn't open in the evenings when people had time to go look for a book. So their "library" was moved back downtown in 1889 to Miner's Book Store which later became Kraege's Book Store. The Berlin Board of Education committed \$250 per year to rent space in the book store and new volumes were purchased by donations.

In 1902, an offer came from a wealthy man from the East. He was willing to give any community that would abide by his terms \$10,000 to erect a library building. That man was Andrew Carnegie. His terms were that the community provide the lot for the building and commit 10% of his gift, or \$1000 per year, for the maintenance of the library. This seemed like a simple enough request but almost every community that decided to accept this offer went through a period of infighting and arguments, including Berlin.

Mr. Carnegie went on to sponsor the building of over 2500 libraries in America and other English speaking countries. Many of these libraries were designed in the grand architectural style of the day, making them easily identifiable in larger cities and monuments in smaller towns. It is estimated his legacy was over \$56 million and he became known as "the father of public libraries."

It took almost a year for the Berlin Common Council to accept the conditions and the grant. Citizens argued that it would cost them too much. An editorial in the *Berlin Evening Journal* pointed out that an average home in Berlin was worth \$500. The tax on a \$500 home to maintain the library would be 18 cents per year. And it went on that this gift is "dumping \$10,000 right into the city" by giving work to laborers, mechanics and artisans of all kinds.

Finally, on February 25, 1903, a resolution was passed to provide a tax levy annually for the sum of \$1000 for the maintenance of a public library. This was presented to the voters at the next election. The question passed at the April election with the east side of the city voting heavily for the library and the west side not, which produced another argument by the citizenry. A group of west side residents led by J.J. Wood petitioned the Council to locate the library on a lot (which just happened to be owned by Mr. Wood) on the corner of Broadway and Mound streets. Another group of prominent businessmen wanted the building *centrally* located and so they issued their own petition not to locate the library any further west than Pearl Street.

An ordinance drafted to accept Andrew Carnegie's gift and conditions passed unanimously but the matter of forming a Library Board was deterred until sufficient money could be raised by donation or gift to the city to purchase a site for the Library building. At the May 13, 1903 meeting of the city council, much wrangling and parliamentary maneuvering went on to prevent establishing said Library Board.

At the May 27, 1903 council meeting the ordinance finally was passed and Mayor H.C. Truesdell appointed the following persons to Berlin's first Library Commission: L.M. Kraege, 1st ward; Mrs. C.S. Morris, 2nd ward, for terms of three years beginning July 1903; R.A. Christie, 3rd ward; Albert Mueller, 4th ward; P. A. Porter, 5th ward and Sara McNish for city-at-large. C.H. Wright as superintendent of schools was appointed as ex-officio member. This group of people was now committed to find a lot and the means to pay for it, arrange for an architect to design the building, oversee the construction, buy the furniture, etc and hire a librarian. Calls went out to the people of Berlin to "subscribe" an amount of money to help pay for a lot for this building.

Much was written in the local papers during these months both as editorials and letters to the editor. One suggestion that seemed to be floating around was that the City Council should move City Hall to this building also. (They were currently located on the second floor of the First National Bank building.) Another suggested making the building two stories and putting City Hall above the Library.

Then, of course, there were the suggestions as to where to locate this new public building. A faction, including the editor of *The Berlin Evening Journal* and Father Fiss, pastor of St. Joseph's church, favored the Morris mill site at the river's edge (where the Family Restaurant is located today in 2003). The editor even went so far as to claim he would increase his subscription of \$25 to \$50 if the Board would choose this site. One month later, he was favoring the Nels Johnson blacksmith shop site where the Johnson-Fortnum garage is today. Other sites mentioned were the Brunsman property one block west of the current building (near Market Square), and the Burr property on Huron and Spring Streets next to the Park Hotel. (the location is the west side of the Juliette Manor property in 2003). The Stedman-Boyle lot west of the Methodist church could be had for \$2000. Also the Clara Smith corner, one block south of the Post Office was available. Besides the Wood property, a few more building sites on the west side had been offered but were deemed too far from a central location.

On June 10, 1903, the Library Board settled on the selection of the Stedman-Boyle property on the corner of Park avenue and Pearl street. There was an old house on the lot that old-timers said had been built by Dr. H. Merriman in 1851, when he came to Berlin. That house would be sold and moved from the lot. At auction it fetched \$160 and was sold to C.H. Wright who moved it to his property to be cut up and used as offices for his mill business located on the corners of Ceresco and Pearl and Ceresco and Fox Alley.

The Library Board chose an architect, Mr. Henry Foeller, of Green Bay, at the July, 1903 meeting. His design called for a building 50 by 50 feet. "It was to consist of a basement ten feet high made of grey brick. In the basement was to be a large assembly room, club room, smoking room, repair and store room and a gentleman's toilet. The upper part would consist of a good sized lobby with seating capacity for about 200, two general reading rooms, a reference room, librarian's room, a book room called the stack room and a lady's toilet." The contract further called for heating by

hot water and lighting either by electricity or gas. Mr Foeller guaranteed that the cost of the building would be in the limits of the \$10,000.

While the Board had advertised in Oshkosh, Milwaukee and Minneapolis for a contractor to build the Carnegie, in the end they hired the local team of Kramp and Ceman, with a bid of \$9,111 to do the honors. The original bid was for \$9,281 but \$170 could be subtracted if the Board chose maple floors instead of cork. Other bids came from Thompson Bros of Neenah at \$11,204; N.C. Bacheller of LaCrosse at \$11,725; Green Bay Brick at \$9,747; J.E. Mallory of Oshkosh at \$10,347; and Jas. H. Cullen of Janesville at \$9,761.62.

During that summer of 1903, there was talk also of selling off part of the lot, specifically sixty feet off the north end of the site which would bring more dollars for the library fund. The Pastor of the Methodist Church next door suggested the Board exchange land with the Church instead. They would release the land on the west side of the church used as a driveway in exchange for a strip on the north of the library site. An editorial in the local paper pointed out that this seemed to be the better deal especially since the cost of the lot was already low and with the sale of the house the cost was reduced by almost \$200. That piece of property would produce a lawn around the new building.

At the July 31, 1903 meeting, the Library Board agreed that all of the Carnegie donation should go into the building and that the citizens of Berlin would be asked to help with the furnishings and fixtures. They also met to determine where exactly on the lot the Library would be built. The final decision was to locate it thirty-five feet from the south walk (on Park avenue) and fourteen feet from the west walk (on Pearl street) and with the exchange of land with the Methodist Church the lot appeared almost square. The basement, it was decided would be of Bedford limestone with granite trimmings and steps.

Sketches of the library exterior and floor plans for the main floor and basement were published in the local paper and also displayed in other places. The designation of one of the rooms in the basement as a "smoking room" set off a volley of arguments and discussions. Some people felt while "men" had a perfect right to smoke, the library was not a place to do this and the example it would set would be detrimental to the youth visiting the place.

By the beginning of September 1903, the foundation was in and the walls were being formed up. The local newspaper kept a running commentary on the progress along with comments from the citizenry. By Thanksgiving time, the paper was reporting that the contractors felt they would have the building done by spring. The Library Commission, however, could not satisfactorily negotiate prices for heat and lights and so the systems were not scheduled to be installed before the end of the year. The contractors were, therefore, working without heat and without any lights. The Library Commission spent a lot of time trying to decide if they should put in gas lights or wire for electricity. In the end they opted to do both. Again, a lot was written in the local papers about this situation. An editorial of December 12, 1903 chastised the Commission for allowing the walls to be plastered without wiring for electricity. The Commission claimed a lack of funds as the reason why it wasn't being done at this time. The Board also couldn't come to an agreement with the city's central hot water heating system director. They were threatening to put a furnace in the building if he couldn't come to their terms.

As work progressed on the building, people began talking about its opening and dedication ceremonies. It was rumored that the Library Commission was not planning any big celebration and the editor of the paper let them know he thought they were wrong.

A decision was made by the Board to allow the women's clubs of the city to rent a room in the basement for their meetings at 25 cents per meeting, provided they furnish the room, which they agreed to do. The *Berlin Evening Journal* was now calling on citizens of Berlin to look through their books at home and donate one or more to the library to fill up its shelves. *The Berlin Evening Journal* office had just contributed 45 bound volumes, it stated. In June the newspaper announced that 135 volumes had been received in the past month and promised to supply the collection of Polish books the newspaper editor (Charles Starks) had committed to buy.

Applications for librarian were received about this time and Miss Margaret Biggert was chosen from a field of five applicants. Only one other was from Berlin, the others were from Appleton and Shell Lake, Wis., and Champaign Illinois. It was determined that the librarian would receive \$25 per month as salary. The Board also set the hours for the library which were: Monday through Saturday 2 to 6 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. and Sundays 2 to 5 p.m.

While the building seemed to be moving along, the Commission still struggled with purchasing all the other necessary furniture and equipment for the building. Again *The Berlin Evening Journal* published a lengthy editorial asking the people of Berlin to contribute to help finish off Berlin's first public building. Hamilton Bros. pledged to contribute 5 per cent of their cash sales every Tuesday to the Library fund. It was recorded that the first week's sales netted \$3.66. (Since chairs could be purchased for 40 cents each this was a very good amount). Two baseball teams pledged the proceeds of their game to the Library fund also.

*The Berlin Evening Journal* reported in August of 1903 that the roof of the new building leaks badly and had from the first. The painters had redone their work three times already.

Finally, it was announced that the Carnegie Library would be open to the public on August 12, 1903. There was no ceremony, no speeches, and the entire opening was declared very informal. The Library Commission members, members of the clergy and the mayor were on hand to greet the visitors. The local orchestra, the Ariel, was engaged to play during the three hour evening reception. It was reported that a large crowd took advantage of the evening.

After all the fanfare and hoopla of the building and opening of the structure, very little appeared in the local newspapers about the business of running a library. Even the Library Board minutes reveals very little of the library's business other than agreeing to pay the month's bills, take action on changing the library's hours and holding annual meetings where new Board members are installed. Periodically, the Board would vote to increase the librarian's salary. In 1906 they voted to give the librarian two weeks vacation per year with pay and to pay the salary of a substitute while she was away. The cost for the sidewalks and curbs was raised by the women's groups of the city in 1909. (Which women's groups are not noted.)

In the fall of 1918, the library was closed by the order of the Chief of Police because of a flu epidemic in the city. In 1921, a telephone was authorized to be installed in the library. In 1923, Lucy Morris, the only remaining original member of the Board resigned after 20 years of service.

Margaret Biggert tendered her resignation in 1946 after forty three years on the job, and Nancy Safford was hired as the new librarian. By this time, the librarian's salary was \$115 per month and by the end of the 40's it had been raised to \$166.67 per month. The library was now open 34 hours per week. The appropriation of the city to the library was up to \$2,600 per year.

In 1951, Nona O'Connor, a retired teacher from the Green Lake Normal School was hired as librarian. She stayed for thirteen years. By this time more staff was being hired to assist the librarian. During her time more equipment was purchased, services were added and as always new books joined the growing collection.

The Library underwent extensive remodeling in 1962. New furniture was bought, ceilings lowered, acoustical tile added, the old wood floors in the basement were replaced with concrete, walls and woodwork were painted, new plumbing was installed and the building was rewired and new fixtures installed. The exterior was repainted and a new roof was installed.

The 1960s also saw the birth of the Waushara-Green Lake Cooperative Library Services with Mrs. Jane Caldwell hired as director. This dual system served seven libraries in Waushara County and five in Green Lake County and was housed in the basement of Berlin Public Library.

When Miss O'Connor retired from her position, Mrs. Caldwell was hired as the new librarian. She stayed on for nine years and then a period of co-directors began. Mrs. Ruth Stetter and Miss Diane Page became the first co-directors in 1973.

A new group of library volunteers and supporters was organized in 1967 called the "Friends of the Library." This group ran events to raise money for programs and equipment that were needed but could not be included in the budget. Membership was open to all interested persons. It continues its relationship with the library even to present day in 2003. Their list of donations and help is long over the lifespan of the organization.

Negotiations to buy the Berlin Methodist Church property next door began in 1967. The church had built a new building and their property was up for sale. Again, the City Council had to be persuaded to be forward-looking and buy this piece of land for future library expansion.

By the early 1970's, the use of the Carnegie library and the services the citizens had come to expect was fast taxing the space available in this 1903 building. Under the guidance of President Kay Swan, the Library Board began to seriously look at library expansion. They induced the City Council to commit to spending \$250,000 for this addition. When anticipated federal aid was denied, they went back to ask for \$125,000 more. The matter was put to a vote of the residents and bonding was approved by a majority of voters.

The Library Board engaged the services of the architectural firm of Irion, Reinke and Associates, Inc. of Oshkosh to develop plans for an addition to the present library building. When the plans were approved, bids were let and Colon Wallace of Berlin was awarded the contract in the amount of \$178,659. With other contracts awarded for auxiliary services such as plumbing, electrical, painting, etc. the total cost came to \$375,000. The addition was to add 6000 square feet to the existing building.

The space in the Carnegie was reconfigured for better service. The basement space became the children's section and a new, larger meeting room occupied one half of the second floor. The other half was dedicated for use by the Winnifox Cooperative Technical Services (WCTS). An elevator was installed for access between floors. Entrance to the library was now on ground level with the addition, making it more handicap accessible.

Co-directors Diane, nee Page, Disterhaft and Ruth Stetter as well as members of the library staff suffered through the months of construction and dust. The construction workers tried to work around the library's hours. When the new addition was done, volunteers helped move the many volumes from their old space to the new space. Librarians Page and Stetter directed this massive operation. Before they could start though they had to rethink the placement of the books because the workers had installed the shelving backwards and all previous plans had to be scrapped and reconfigured.

A dedication of the new addition was held on September 12, 1976 with much more fanfare than the original opening. Speeches and presentations were given by Ray Kinziger, Superintendent of Schools and a Board Member, Mrs. Swan, the Board President, Mayor Gordon Jodarski and Mrs. Patricia Goodrich, Wisconsin State Representative from Berlin. Mrs. Lu Gillett was also on hand to autograph her recently published book, 'Early Homes in Berlin Wisconsin.' Mrs. Swan received the "Trustee of the Year" award from the Wisconsin Library Association for her dedication to making this project happen.

With the addition, more services could also be offered and records and art prints along with microfilmed newspapers quickly became popular.

Berlin Public Library became a member of the Winnefox Library System in 1976. The Winnefox Federated Library System began with libraries in Green Lake, Waushara, and Winnebago counties. Later, Marquette County would join this consortium. In 2001 Fond du Lac County also joined the system. Up until this time each library worked alone and each was funded by their local municipality. The libraries were trying to find a way to have the Counties share in the cost of usage by rural or county residents. Berlin Public Library now receives support from Green Lake and Waushara Counties, beside the City of Berlin.

This new State supported system gave each participating library a larger selection of available materials, shared revenue, and shared ideas with monthly meetings held for directors and staff members. Because this was a new concept, the librarians and staff spent many hours developing the Winnefox system into what it is today. Joining Winnefox became one of the most important events in the life of this library in the 1970's and 80's.

Ruth Stetter and Carol Frank became co-directors in 1978 and Carol Frank became sole director in 1988. At that time the position of "youth services" librarian was established with Elaine Helmrick serving in that position.

An editorial in the *Berlin Journal* in 1985 noted the gifts, some anonymous, donated to the library by its patrons, including two Apple computers, video cassettes, a VCR, a copier and a coin operated typewriter. A compact disc collection was started in 1988. The Berlin Public Library had become a media center besides being a book dispensary. Circulation was running



over 55,000 items with almost 40,000 books in the collection, a far cry from the original 2000 to 3000 volumes reported to have been in the 1904 library.

Berlin's library became the center of the Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in 1989. It was selected as the site to serve residents of Green Lake, Marquette, and Waushara Counties in the Winnefox System. It no longer serves in that capacity.

Ruth Stetter saw the need to start a local history collection and gathered news clippings and other materials into this new feature. The 1990's saw the expansion of the local history section. Genealogy information was gathered and school year books, city directories and other items of local information filled the shelves and file drawers. Reference librarian, Jean Chier, was assigned the project of preparing files with local history news items, copies of family histories, business histories, and community histories. A card file was started to indicate location of this information and is still maintained today by volunteers. Local historian, Joyce Stemler, donated her Civil War files to the Berlin Public Library for this collection. Other local historians have donated their papers to the Library including those of Annette Secora, former Board member. The files are used extensively by the public and the librarians are contacted regularly by persons researching their family history or other information.

On October 7, 1993, the library celebrated its 90th anniversary. The program included demonstrations of the automated circulation system and online catalog. There were speeches and presentations by Kay Roethel, Board President, Mayor Harry Klassa, City Administrator Mark Rohloff and Library Director Carol Frank. A painting by local artist, June Chionchio, was presented. Exhibits by other local artists and book signing by local authors were featured. Visitors could tour the facility including the office of the Winnefox Cooperative Technical Services located on the second floor of the Carnegie building. Pam Brown served as the director of WCTS until her retirement.

After almost 23 years of employment in the Library, Carol Frank retired in July, 1998. Karen M. Peterson became the library director in August of 1998.

Circulation in the nine thousand range per month was reached by the turn of the new century. A new program that established a rotating collection of books, etc. at the city's senior citizen housing units was very well received. A program by which parents of newborns were given books for their children was also started by the Friends of the Library in the mid 1990's and continues today.

By the late 1990's, a new figure was added to the list of statistics for the library - that of Internet users. There are 17 computer stations available for patrons. The library director and her staff regularly attend workshops, classes and seminars, including computer classes, to be able to bring that expertise back to Berlin.

An extensive renovation and redecorating project was undertaken in late 1997 and early 1998. The library was closed for 10 days while the entire library was recarpeted, walls were painted and new furniture purchased. Gone was the orange and gold of the 1970's decor. The entire library was emptied for this project and stored in large vans. The Library Board used trust and gift funds to supplement the \$42,000 appropriated by the city.

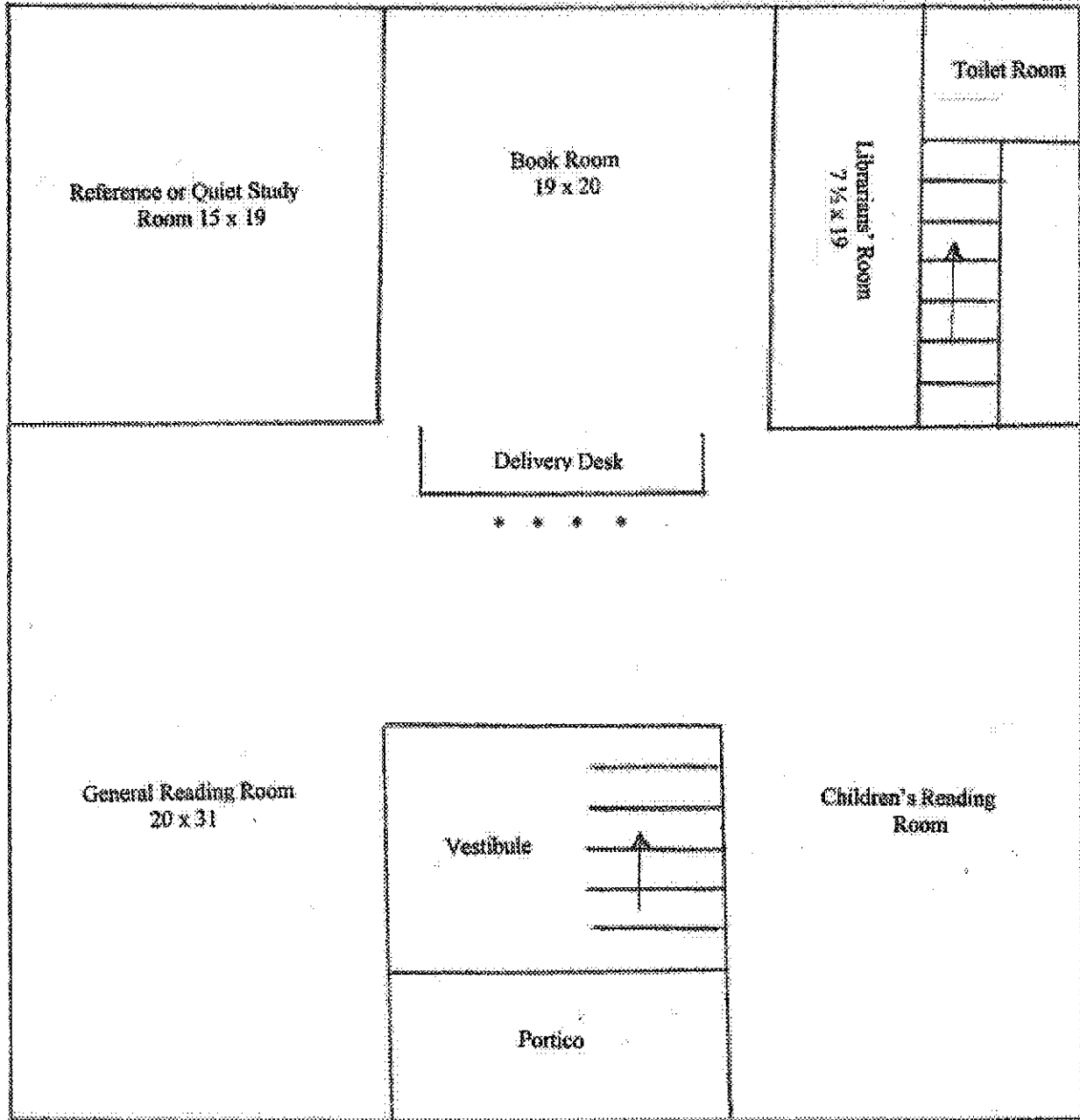
Many new programs for children were started or expanded in recent years. The summer reading program, promoted by the Library, regularly sees over 100 to 150 children registered. Entertainers for special programs such as story-tellers, puppeteers, musicians and animal handlers always prove very popular. This is another area where funds from the "Friends" are used.

Multiple city organizations and groups regularly use the library facility for their meetings including 'Friends in Council' and the Athena Club.

From the humble beginnings in 1903 with 3000 volumes to today's varied collection of books, newspapers and magazines, audio books, videos, DVDs, compact discs, computer stations, and historical files, Berlin's Public Library continues to strive to bring information and entertainment to all seekers.

The Following is a diagram of the Main Floor

NORTH



The Following is a diagram of the Basement



SOUTH

**City of Berlin  
Head Librarians/Directors**

**Margaret Biggert 1903-1946**

**Nancy Safford 1946-1951**

**Nona O'Connor 1951-1964**

**Jane Caldwell 1951-1973**

**Diane Page Disterhaft 1973-1978 (co-director)**

**Ruth Stetter 1973-1987 (co-director to 1987)**

**Carol Frank co-director 1978-1989 Director 1988-1998**

**Karen M. Peterson 1998 - present**

**CURRENT STAFF**

Diane Disterhaft *Librarian-Technical Services/Reference*

Christine Carroll *Children's Librarian*

Christine Kalupa *Library Assistant II*

Deb Munroe *Library Assistant I*

Eileen Bruss *Library Clerk II*

Bev Thada *Library Clerk II*

Florice Bahr *Library Clerk I*

John Mix *Library Clerk I*

**Berlin Public Library  
Board of Trustees 2003**

Kay Roethel

*President*

Peggy Hallman

*Finance Committee Secretary*

Don Krebsbach

*Treasurer, Chair Finance Committee, Personnel Committee*

Margaret Guertler

*Chair Personnel Committee, School Representative*

Terri Mauel

*Chair Policy Committee, Personnel Committee, Member-at-large*

Darlene Bielinski

*Policy Committee, Member-at-large*

Pam Brown

*Finance Committee, Policy Committee*

**LIBRARY COMMISSION BOARD**

appointed May 27, 1903

*L. M. Kraege*

*Mrs. C.S. (Lucy) Morris*

*R. A. Christie*

*Albert Mueller*

*P. A. Porter*

*Sara McNish*

## Resources

Thanks are given to the following for sharing their information.

Berlin Public Library historical files and microfiche files  
Berlin Historical Society files

Berlin Evening Journal  
Berlin Journal  
Oshkosh Northwestern  
The Resorter  
Berlin High School Red & Green

Berlin Common Council Minutes  
Berlin Library Board Minutes

Personal Reflections of Diane Page Disterhaft, Carol Frank, Karen M. Peterson

Personal files of:

Bobbie Erdmann  
Annette Secora