

A FRIEND MAY WELL BE RECKONED THE MASTERPIECE OF NATURE. Ralph Waldo Emerson

One of the most helpful and long lasting benefits to the county's library system materialized on June 23, 1988 when the Friends of the Library became an official organization.

A handful of dedicated patrons spearheaded the movement to make this dream a reality for the library staff. Three men contributed a great deal of time and effort to the undertaking. They were the first president of the Friends, Dr. Don Dian; the first recipient of "Friend of the Year," Mr. Richard Wilkey; and the first and only treasurer the Friends organization has ever known, Mr. Ed Goetz.

Friends of the Library is a national, non-profit group comprised of non-staff members whose purpose is to assist local libraries with raising funds, volunteering, and assisting with other projects.

Over the years, their assistance has been invaluable to the library and its endeavors. Primarily through book sales, the Friends have raised enough money to support a wide variety of special programs, author visits, and both the winter and summer reading programs.

IF THERE IS NO STRUGGLE, THERE IS NO PROGRESS. Frederick Douglas

The end of the decade was a time of great expectations and a time of turmoil. The fact that the library was bursting at the seams and expansion was a necessity was not questioned. Nearly everything else was. Should the stately Carnegie building be saved as an historical monument with an addition tastefully incorporated to the east? Should an all-new library be built on the south bank of the Wabash River where space and parking were non-issues, and the library could make a positive statement about our community values to those entering our town from the north? Should the new building be erected on the former jail lot? Was it important to keep the library in its downtown location and not desert the central city? Should we build a showcase library, pursue a tax saving, budget building, or hammer out a compromise?

As Library Director, Marilyn Hite, her staff, the Library Board, and interested citizens struggled with building issues, people found themselves allying with one group or another, each believing strongly in its vision for the library's future. Even the Library Board found itself split, first in favor of a new building on the Wabash River site and then, after personnel changes, in favor of a new building on Washington Street at the site of the former jail.

After many months of controversy, divisive meetings, plans adopted, pursued, and then ultimately rejected, a compromise was finally achieved and the county was ready to move forward in their pursuit of an all-new, modern library. The former jail lot on Washington Street was to be the new home for the 24,000 square foot, \$2.6 million dollar library. In the process, Director Hite offered her letter of resignation stating that she was leaving her position to pursue new opportunities in the field of library service. Her departure deeply saddened the staff and the Board.

Contractors (all from Fort Wayne, IN) were named for the project. They were: General Contractor—Hamilton Hunter for \$1,199,225; Mechanical and Fire Protection—Shambaugh & Sons for \$456,186; and Electrical—A. Hattersley for \$198,242. Ron Menze from Archonics, Inc. was the architect. These officials, along with a crowd of county, city, and library officials were all present for the Ground Breaking Ceremony held on a warm afternoon at 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 28, 1990. The history-making event beat, but not by much, a torrential summer storm, complete with flashing lightning bolts, rolling thunder, and two and a half inches of rain.

NOTHING HAPPENS UNLESS FIRST A DREAM.
Carl Sandburg

While plans were progressing for the new Main Library, improvements for the Ossian Branch were also underway. The entire quarter block on the northwest corner of Jefferson and Mill Streets in Ossian was acquired for \$95,000 in 1989, with the hopes of building a new branch facility in that location. Because there was a need to wait until the Main Library project was completed, the stately, ex-Sherwood Hunter house (on-site in Ossian) was

remodeled and brought up to code to serve as an interim facility. Its elegant, old home ambience, complete with intricate and beautiful woodwork, served the people of Ossian and vicinity well for five years.

The new library in Bluffton was officially dedicated at 2:00 p.m. August 25, 1991. The dedication was held even though the materials and some of the furnishings were not in place, in order to achieve the goal of a one-year construction timetable. State Senator, Larry Macklin, the main speaker at the event, credited the “very rich heritage” of Bluffton and Wells County as one of the primary reasons for making the goal of a new library facility a reality. He congratulated all for their dedication and perseverance.

General Contractor, Hamilton Hunter, presented the key to the new library to Beryl J. Gray, Library Board President. Flowers were presented to Library Director, Barbara Elliott, and each of the staff members for superlative work done for the building program and for the progress and service of the library.

Following comments from several officials, everyone was invited inside to see for himself or herself the spacious and beautiful new facility.

The final step necessary before the library could be opened to the public was a gargantuan moving task. Eighty thousand library books, plus all of the other materials necessary for the operation of a modern library, needed to travel across the street in an orderly fashion.

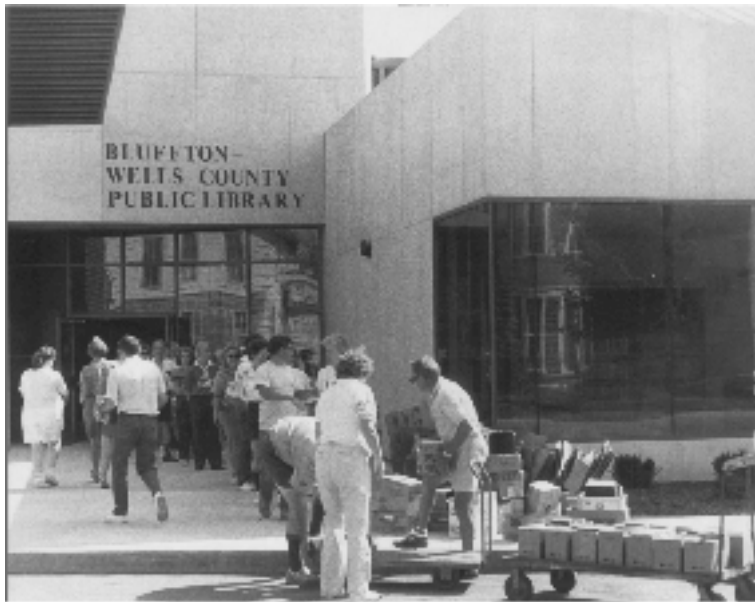
The staff, along with hired movers, had carted much of the equipment, furniture, supplies and materials across the street in the weeks preceding moving day, which arrived on a sunny Saturday morning, September 7, 1991.

Two hundred ninety six volunteers participated in the well-orchestrated move. The Friends of the Library, stationed under a large tent erected in the grassy lot to the east of the Carnegie building, played an integral part in checking people in and assigning tasks.

Eagle Scout candidate, Jason Gerdom, had chosen the library move as his community service project. Under the direction of Library Director, Barbara Elliott, Jason arranged for scouts to assist with the physical aspects of the move. He had also made arrangements for food and beverages to refuel the workers.



A conveyor belt ran from the stacks area of the old Carnegie, past the Circulation Desk, down the stairs to the front doors and then out the doors and down two flights of steps to the street. At this point the book brigade of volunteers took over with book carts, biceps, and back muscles. With this army of competent assistants the move exceeded all expectations and actually was wrapped up in dramatic success three hours ahead of the projected completion time.



The new library officially opened its doors for business at 9:00 a.m., Tuesday, September 24, 1991. Nearly four weeks later, a third “special event” day was held to herald the new library (in addition to the Dedication and Moving Day experiences).

The public was invited to attend an Open House on Sunday, October 20, 1991 to view the new library, complete with its furnishings, materials and equipment in operating form.

Over five hundred guests marveled at the new facility as they enjoyed refreshments provided by the Friends of the Library. After a decade of dreaming, planning, compromising, and diligent work, an all new, modern, one story, accessible-to-all library stood in downtown Bluffton, a testimony to this community’s values.



VISION IS THE ART OF SEEING THINGS INVISIBLE.

Jonathan Swift

The decade of expansion was just beginning for Wells County residents. Once the need for a new central library was met, people began to focus on the southern part of the county and what could be done to better serve the people there.

The residents welcomed a pioneering solution. A Library Services and Construction grant from the Indiana Library and Historical Board was awarded to the Wells Co. Public Library to be used for a microwave transmission of the Library's On-Line Catalog to a shared Branch located directly outside the high school's library.

This was the first time wireless transmission had been used to carry library data to a remote area. The library's on-line catalog was thus made available to the Southern Wells students.

The school and library entered into a cooperative agreement whereby the school would provide space for a small library branch in exchange for use of the catalog during the day. The Southern Wells Branch would be open at least two nights a week to serve both adults and children during non-school hours.



A ribbon-cutting ceremony and Open House was held on Sunday, May 2, 1993 to salute the new facility and the spirit of cooperation between the school and library. Terry Burns was named Branch Manager for the innovative library and she is still serving in that capacity today.

Once the central and the southern parts of the County were well situated, it was time to move north to Ossian where the residents had been patiently waiting their turn for major library improvements.

Due to happy circumstances, the looming library project in Ossian would cost the taxpayers no additional funds. Money conserved from the Main Library construction project plus money donated specifically for construction and/or capital improvement would pay the full costs for the new Ossian Branch.

The Library Board accepted Hamilton Hunter's low bid of \$248,000 on the 3,750 ft. facility to be built on the northwest corner of Jefferson and Mill Streets in Ossian. (Mr. Hunter was the general contractor for the Main Library project in Bluffton.)

The ground breaking ceremony for the Ossian Branch was held at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, October 31 and a little over a year later on Sunday, November 14, 1994 the new facility was dedicated followed by an Open House for the public. With the new Ossian Branch building came extended evening hours, elimination of the lunchtime closing, additional staff, and enhanced services.

