

# Halton Hills Public Library: Centennial Celebrations

## Georgetown (1895), Acton (1898)

In 1995 and 1998 the Georgetown and Acton libraries are celebrating a 100 years of providing free public library service to the citizens on their communities. While Free Public Libraries had been available in select parts of the province since the early 1880s, library service in Acton and Georgetown was founded on even earlier traditions.

### The Traditions

One of these traditions was that of public schools. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, "school promoters" convinced government that the formal education of the province's youth was a major priority, making attendance compulsory for an increasingly broad range of age groups. Approved textbooks were at the core of education, but a broader range of books was approved for school "libraries" (usually little more than a couple of shelves in the corner of the single classroom.) Under certain conditions the materials could be made available to others in the school district. By 1883 the Board of Education for Acton voted to transfer its collection from the overcrowded public school to the new Town Hall, where on Monday evening at 7:00 the public could go and select from nearly 1400 items. Practically the first order of business at the founding meeting of the Acton Free Library Board, 1 April 1898, was to accept the collection from the Acton Public School Board.

The Georgetown collection sprang from a related tradition--that of the Mechanic's Institutes. These were associations whose principal purpose was to encourage those who had finished school, particularly members of the working class, to continue their education. Evening classes and special lectures were a significant part of the program of the Mechanic's Institutes, along with a library and a reading room stocked with newspapers and magazines. The number of Institutes in Ontario had grown substantially since the first two were formed in 1835, but a large number were formed after 1877, when the provincial government, through the Department of Education, began matching local dollars raised. Formed with considerable enthusiasm in the spring of 1880, the Georgetown Mechanic's Institute's collection grew rapidly for about three years and slowly, if at all, for the next dozen. The number of active members in a community of about 1500 slid from more than 100 down to between 60 and 70. Occasionally helped out by a grant of \$25 or \$40 (and free rent) from the village council, the Georgetown Mechanic's Institute frequently failed to qualify for any money from the province. Annual membership fees of a dollar were a day's wages for the working men the Institute was supposed to benefit. By 1895 new provincial legislation encouraged its directors to turn the whole collection (nearly 1300 volumes) over to the village on the condition that access to it be free for all residents of the village.

### The new Free Public Libraries

In charge of the newly created "Free Public Libraries" were the newly appointed Public Library Boards. In both communities, Board members included a representative of council. Acton included the irrepressible H.P. Moore, editor and owner of the *Acton Free Press*, John Cameron, a local builder, and the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist ministers.

So long as the collection consisted of only a couple of thousand titles and library business was only done on two or three nights of the week, only one staff person, typically a young woman, was hired. Acton's first public librarian was Miss Ettie Laird, a girl of 16 who also worked at the post office, where among other things she did telegraphy. For \$40 a year she was to enforce all rules, keep the books in systematic order, keep a record of membership, notify delinquents, keep the books, shelves, etc., carefully dusted, to be courteous at all times to members and to report to the board any discourtesy or misconduct on the part of those who visit the library, and the infamous "such other duties as the board might require." Wages were raised to \$50 in 1901, \$90 in 1913 and \$120 by 1918. These wages brought Acton in closer line with Georgetown where Miss Alberta Glass was hired in 1899 for \$100 a year. The rules of the Acton library were fairly simple. You had to be 14, known to the librarian or vouched for by "responsible citizens." A library card cost five cents, a copy of the printed catalogue another ten. The Dewey Decimal system would not arrive until 1915, and a card catalogue well after that. In 1924 the Board was still printing supplementary catalogues after its annual Fall buying trip to Toronto. Members could borrow one book at a time; overdue fines after two weeks were charged at the rate of five cents a day. There were additional fines for turning down the leaves, marking or defacing books. Noise and loud conversation were forbidden as was smoking. The

Acton Library was open 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Saturdays. A switch to Friday nights, and the occasional experiments with afternoon and Saturday hours were the only tinkering with hours before the first purpose-built Acton library opened in 1967. From the beginning, Georgetown's hours were substantially longer: 12:30 to 5:30 each afternoon and 6:30 to 8:00 (summer) or 9:00 (winters).

Both collections continued to be housed in the respective Town Halls. In Georgetown hope sprang eternal that the Carnegie estate, which had been so generous with other public libraries across North America, could be persuaded to donate towards a new building. They were turned down in 1903 and again in 1910. The solution presented itself in 1912, when the members of the local Congregational Church, anticipating the union of the Congregational Church with those of the Methodists and Presbyterians, decided to move next door to Knox Presbyterian. The founding president of the Georgetown Mechanics Institute, and leading local industrialist, John R. Barber, with the other trustees of the Congregational Church deeded the building to the Town to be used as a library. The conditions of sale included the provisos that no "gambling of any kind" be permitted on the premises, that the Memorial window remain, and that the Church bell "be rung each Sabbath for Church Services." The Carnegie Foundation was promptly asked for \$4000 to cover the cost of renovating the building, which was equally promptly refused. J.B. McKenzie of Acton was given the contract for renovations (rest rooms, a new metal ceiling) and the library opened in its new official home on 10 Oct. 1913. Having just escaped a corner of the old Town Hall there was substantial extra space despite dividing part of the building for use as an auditorium. It was equipped with gymnastic equipment, which during World War I was used for training recruits. Just after the war, the YMCA used the facilities.

The Acton Library, by contrast was increasingly feeling the pinch. In 1918, without much success, the board raised the issue of larger premises. The 15 by 19 foot room was inadequate for the collection let alone the possibility of a "reading room." Again the Carnegie Trust was applied to without success. In 1923 the board was taken to task at the annual provincial library convention for not spending enough on books. In their defense the board claimed that they had indeed bought 140 books the previous year, but that there was no room for many more. Later that year the Board made more noises about approaching the Carnegie Trust. Salvation came in the spring of 1933 when the Murray family left money to be used to improve library facilities, either in a new building, or through renovations in the Town Hall. In the spring of 1935, the library moved around the corner onto Mill St. into what seemed like spacious new quarters in the front of the new YMCA building.

The years after World War II dramatically changed the character of both communities. Although in 1901 Acton had stood second only to Oakville in size among Halton's urban communities, there was almost no growth in population between World War I and World War II. Georgetown, by contrast, had seen steadier growth. Then between 1951 and 1971, Acton's population nearly doubled while Georgetown grew fivefold.

Most of these new residents lived in young families. New schools were opened, bringing with them (in some cases) special school library facilities. In Georgetown, some of the pressure was relieved when the junior collection was moved into the basement.

In Acton the solution was much more inspired. With Canada's Centennial still some years off, the federal government announced grants towards community projects to celebrate the nation's 100th birthday. The Library Board was first off the mark, and was selected ahead of projects like a Band Hall, swimming pool, or chapel at the cemetery. The Board of Education chipped in with a shady corner of the Robert Little Public School property, and in June 1967, the new library facility opened. The new facility sparked a radical change in the way the Acton library operated. Hours shifted from 4.5 per week to 24.5. It had its own meeting room, tables and chairs for students to work at, and improved parking. The "crystal ball" columnist, in the special edition of the *Acton Free Press* devoted to the opening, noted "duct work" for air conditioning, which had not been installed, and an electrical outlet at the main desk "that some day in the future, will provide power for the electronic stamping of cards!" More to the point the library now had a telephone, and was in a position to request books on interlibrary loans from other libraries in the region. Ironically the future was unfolding in a library designed to the pattern approved by the Carnegie Foundation at the turn of the century!

The telephone installed in the new Acton library was in many ways symbolic of a new era in library service on a number of levels. Since World War I, high stands of inflexible wooden shelves overflowed with books, the occasional newspaper and *National Geographic*. The collections had been small enough that the two or three staff knew virtually every title. The 50 years of Mrs. Isobel Watson's service are exceptional but many of the staff stayed on for decades or more. The card catalogues were housed in a range of wooden units, and featured handwritten cards, typewritten cards and the occasional printed card purchased with a book. Some books on the shelves still had the bottom of the cloth spine painted black, with white letters neatly painted on for the call numbers. A professional cataloguer had helped in the move of the Georgetown Library in 1913 and in the conversion to "Dewey" in 1915, but

the subject catalogues were full of "local variations." The staff were all from the community, and had little or no formal education in librarianship. The 1960s, in a great many other fields as well as libraries, saw a growing movement to professional education, provincial and national standards of service and a growing sense of the critical centrality of information in the economy.

The Board of Education was centralized in Halton in the late 1960s, even as the local public libraries were starting to benefit from the professional expertise of the provincially-funded regional library systems. (Halton libraries, served by the South-Central Regional Library System at one point featured the budding talents of a young graphic artist, Lynn Johnston!) In addition to bringing additional titles to a broad range of its member libraries, including Acton and Georgetown, the Regional Library System had a mandate to encourage rural libraries, so instead of dividing a small grant between Acton and Georgetown the township of Esquesing for a few years had its own depository library in Stewarttown Hall.

## **The Halton Hills Public Libraries**

Despite considerable local protest, in 1973 the provincial government shifted the footing of local government, merging Esquesing with Acton and Georgetown to create the new Town of Halton Hills. In accordance with the Public Libraries Act, there could be only one Public Library Board and in 1974 the Boards merged. In the spring of 1974 the new board hired its first professional Chief Librarian, Betsy Cornwell.

Over the ensuing two decades library service has rapidly evolved. One of the first priorities of the Halton Hills Library Board was to expand and coordinate hours of service. Within a decade the hours in Acton had gone from 4.5 per week to more than 45. And by the mid-1980s Sunday hours were added in Georgetown.

The biggest issue facing the new Board was the severely cramped library in Georgetown. Gone was the auditorium, and extra meeting rooms in the basement. All available space was crammed with books, and the beginnings of an audio-visual collection. A calculation based on the American Library Association standards for public library service said Georgetown needed a library of about 25,000 square feet. It was stuffed into a building with less than 6000. Renovating and expanding on the Church St. location was looked at and discarded as inadequate; plans were drawn up for a new site two blocks down Main St. at Cedarvale Park, a setting very reminiscent of the Acton location. When this was blocked, the site at Church and Market was significantly enlarged and renovated. The Halton Hills Library and Cultural Centre opened in October 1981, adding to the library an art gallery in the former Congregational Church sanctuary and the 267-seat John Elliott Theatre. While the renovation failed to address issues of parking and included only half the space the previous studies had identified was required for library service, the facility was a dramatic improvement.

At the same time the range of services and programs offered to residents of Halton Hills grew to encompass Summer Reading clubs, story times, and special performers, such as Sharon, Lois and Bram. Gordon Korman and other authors and illustrators (including best-selling local children's authors and illustrators like Kathy Stinson (*Red is Best*) and Joanne Fitzgerald (*Doctor Kiss Says Yes*) spoke to enthusiastic readers of all ages.

"Books on Wheels" extended library services into Seniors Residences, the hospital and individual shut-ins' homes. At the same time the collection expanded in character to encompass a wide-range of book-tape kits, LPS, cassettes, and CDs, 16 mm Film, Laser discs and VHS videos, and CD-ROMs. In a number of cases the Halton Hills Public Library was among the most innovative in the province in drawing new media into the collection.

Much of the rest of the Library's history can be told in terms of partnerships. The Georgetown branch operates in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Department of the Town of Halton Hills. Over the last twenty years the Library has functioned as a department of the Town; albeit one managed through a Council-appointed citizen's board. Special collections have grown in partnership with special groups in the community: the Local History collection and the Esquesing Historical Society; the Literacy Collection and the North Halton Literacy Guild; the Talking Book collections and the Lion's Clubs, the Royal Canadian Legion and the Kinsmen. Efficiencies in purchasing and cataloguing the collection were achieved through cooperatives like the Library Services Centre. In many ways the future of the library is defined by HALINET (the Halton Information Network). Originally a partnership of the Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills Public Libraries, HALINET cooperatively purchased and operated a system that automated the inventory management systems. The current system tracks the movements of more than 100,000 items, moving over one-third of a million times a year to the homes of upwards of 20,000 active library users. There is an active library card in almost seven of every eight homes in Halton Hills. The latest generation of this automation allows people with computers and modems at home to check on the status on any of those items. In the meantime, the partnership has grown well beyond the original three to include all the Public Libraries in Halton, both School Boards and Sheridan College. So too has the scope grown, as HALINET helped foster the growth of the Halton Community Network and its connections to the Internet, as well as search for ways to cooperatively license access to electronic information.

In 1967 members of the Acton Library Board attended a meeting which described a vision of a new system where “data--pages of books or magazines would be stored on videotape at a central point and could be dialed to appear on TV screens across the system. If the page is required for further study, the user presses a button and a print-out machine at the central location reproduces the page, which is then mailed to the user.” In 1995 the Halton Hills Public Library became one of the first public libraries in Canada to launch its own World Wide Web server on the Internet, where users at home or in its branches could connect with the descendants of those “videotapes” and freely view, amongst other things images of the Town Halls (one razed, one renovated) where free public library service started in the community 100 years before.