

A Fresh Look At Nebraska



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By LuAnn Schindler

Henry Ward Beecher stated, "A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life."

Even in today's digital age, where printed material is just a mouse click away or can be downloaded to the Kindle, the library holds a special place within a community.

Throughout history, libraries have been established, torn down and rebuilt. The library is a survivor, a testament to the ancient Greek's push for a literate society.

The first public library established in 300 B.C., the Great Library of Alexandria, serves as a model most libraries emulate today.

America's first library began when John Harvard donated 400 books to a university in Massachusetts. You guessed it; it became Harvard. Free lending libraries gained popularity during the 1600s, and Ben Franklin introduced subscription libraries, where patrons paid a fee to purchase books and borrowed for free.

Free public libraries came about when free public education became the norm. Thanks to Andrew Carnegie, more than 1,700 public libraries were built between 1881 and 1919.

Thirty-three years after Nebraska reached statehood, the Nebraska Library Commission was formed by the Legislature. Military posts hosted Nebraska's first libraries. Literary societies offered collections and women's clubs provided free reading rooms before Carnegie and school libraries opened their doors to browsers.

Our state houses a wide gamut of libraries. In Monowi, visit Rudy's Library, a single-room building founded in memory of Rudy Eiler and maintained by his wife, who is the last resident of the Boyd County village. It contains 5,000 volumes.

Atkinson's library is one of the only libraries with a drive-up window. Call in your book order, pick it up. It's faster than fast food drive-thru.

The Raymond A. Whitwer Tilden Public Library is a magnificent brick library of curves; there are no right angles in the structure's design.

Growing up, my sister and I would make the block and a half journey to the library on Saturday afternoons (post-football season). We'd climb the staircase to the glass doors and browse. You could find me in the northwest corner, next to the expansive windows. Here, I discovered Nancy Drew and read every book in the series, in order.

Usually, I could finish a book in a couple days, and by Wednesday, I'd return the book and check out the next mystery.

Libraries are gathering spots, not only for a community of book lovers, but for the entire neighborhood.

Today's libraries offer book clubs, author presentations, art exhibits and more. Patrons can check out books, CDs, DVDs or VHS tapes, use computers to connect to the Internet, take kids to story time, and participate in reading contests.

Today, when budget cuts threaten the daily operations of many Nebraska libraries, we citizens need to remember that a library connects us with insight from some of the greatest teachers in the world. Libraries aren't a luxury. They are a necessary structure built on human interaction and reaction.

It's February, Library Lover's Month. When's the last time you checked out your local library?