

Calgary's new Central Library

IN THE NEWS

Library Turns 100.

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John Denholm remembers traipsing to the library in the early 1930s, just a boy from Elbow Park anxious to discover what lined the narrow stacks. The walk through the smartly kept streets of single-storeyed bungalows, lined with trimmed shrubs and hedges, was filled with anticipation, at times too long for a boy to wait. "My mom favoured novels," he recalls, rattling off her favourite author. "While she looked, I'd just go through the history sections, or picture books. "I looked forward to it. It was learning. But it was always fun."

The sandstone structure, still today's Memorial Park library, with its wide and welcoming concrete stairway, quickly climbed into the city's heart. It was dubbed the people's university, a new temple of knowledge.

The Calgary Public Library will celebrate the 100-year anniversary of its inception this month, 10 decades since the library board was created and began the task of building its first library in a burgeoning, turn-of-the-century community. During that time of unprecedented growth -- the city was experiencing an economic boom even bigger than today's -- Calgary's population exploded, quadrupling from 17,000 in 1906 to more than 74,000 by the time its first library was built in 1912, four years after the board's creation. Calgary was teeming with opportunity, a city of great ambition quickly jumping at the chance to build a centre of education, based on simple collections of books, magazines and reference materials. Hats were not worn inside. And shy but strict librarians in horn-rimmed glasses demanded whispered tones.

The institution quickly expanded, adding a new branch almost every decade, film and record-lending services in the 1940s, a bookmobile in 1952, book clubs for women in the 1960s, and in 1972, after 60 years of free borrowing, a 25-cent membership fee.

Today, the public library has grown into 17 spacious, high-tech branches offering a vast array of collections, including digital products, CDs, DVDs, Internet access, downloadable programs and entertainment, literacy programs, homework help, and dozens of reading groups catering to all ages from preschoolers to seniors. Several newer libraries have since been built adjacent to shopping centres, hockey arenas or recreation complexes like South Fish Creek and Cardel Place, creating a one-stop-shopping opportunity for families to stop in the library while they take part in other daily activities.

Libraries now are buzzing with activity, gathering places that are anything but silent. Kids mill about reading areas filled with comfy pillows, flipping through books or playing computer games. Teens study at tables or do research on the Internet while adults young and old settle into oversized chairs with a good book or magazine.

Today, Denholm, 85, still hasn't broken his book habit. He's a weekly regular at the pyramid-shaped Fish Creek Library. "I like to look for magazines -- the New Yorker, the Economist. I enjoy watching all the kids too. They always look like they're having a good time."

That's certainly true of Emma Rouleau, 13, and her little brother Keeghan, 8. Students of their mother Lisa Rouleau's child-guided home-schooling program, they depend on the public library's vast collection of programs, resources and collections. They spend hours at different branches every week, searching out reference material, non-fiction math and science books, novels, picture books, even books on CDs.

"The library is our curriculum. We follow education guidelines, and our passions. We look up things we've been discussing, just random looking, and we find everything we need. It's a huge part of our lives." says Rouleau, sitting in front of stacks of her own books in her Sunnyside home. "You can't stress enough the importance of libraries as a centrepiece of the community, a gathering place, a place where everyone can go and learn. "It still amazes me how much they have to offer, especially electronically."

Advanced technology, says library director Gerry Meek, has in fact allowed for more user growth than ever, four times the rate of Calgary's booming population. In the last year, user rates have grown by six per cent, well above the city's two per cent population increase. In the same time frame, the library saw 14.5 million circulations, and about 5.5 million actual visits. "That's the highest usage of any public building in the city," Meek says. "It's even more than what the Flames get. "Our libraries aren't quiet anymore, they are places of action, where the community comes to learn. "We are everyone's living room, even to those who may not have a living room or a bedroom, we are a safe haven for anyone that wants to learn."

To help accommodate city growth and increased usage, the public library has been looking to build a new downtown library, removing the aging, boxy W.R. Castell Central Library north of City Hall and replacing it with a much larger, more modern building, boasting a spacious interior and welcoming plaza front. But fundraising for the \$300-million project has become a mammoth challenge, with only \$40 million committed by the city so far.

"There's just no money. And the longer this takes, the more expensive it becomes," Meek says. Four years ago, when library officials first drew up a plan for the new building, estimates were as low as \$120 million. Thanks to inflation and rising construction costs, that estimate has grown to \$300 million. Officials are working on a presentation to bring to the province and the federal government in the next few months. And once at least 80 per cent of the funding is in place, the city can get going on a long-planned international design competition for the new building, estimated to be some 360,000 square feet, more than twice as large as the existing 167,000-square-foot downtown branch.

Mayor Dave Bronconnier says the city plans to work hard at tapping the provincial and federal governments for the remaining \$260 million in funding. "The library is loved to death by Calgarians. And we have an ambitious expansion project underway. "But we cannot keep paying for all of it only through Calgarians' tax dollars. "We're working on it and we'll just have to make stronger partnerships." Bronconnier added that the city just committed \$1.5 million two weeks ago to renovate and expand the Signal Hill Library, essentially doubling it in size in the next few years.

Plans are also underway for three new libraries in the suburban corners of the city over the next five to 10 years, including one in the northeast's Saddleridge, one in the northwest's Royal Oak/Tuscany area, and the other in the deep southeast's Seton.

Meek says any new buildings that accommodate growth and increased usage are critically needed. "Our libraries of the future need to be places for the community that are relevant at all stages of life," Meek says. "They should be the next Alberta Advantage, a great equalizer, and something that will always provide the tools to achieve your life's goals."

Louise Daley can attest to that. The 84-year-old is now working on a general studies degree online through Athabasca University, a program made available through the library's distance education program, which also allows her to study and write exams in Calgary. "God willing," she says, she will graduate in two years. "People think I'm crazy, yes, but I never want to stop learning, I'm enjoying it so much. "To me, the library is a place where there's so many doors to open, each time you step into a new room, there's new things to see, new things to discover. It will always be a place for new horizons."

Even Ald. Joe Ceci, also a library board member, found his calling in a library stack. Thirteen years ago, he had the grand idea of running for alderman in his area and took a quick trip to the Forest Lawn library,

where he found a book called How to Get Elected at the Civic Level. He followed all the instructions, step by step. The rest is history.

The City of Calgary will mark the library board's 100th anniversary in a series of special events at City Hall on Monday, including a public celebration in the atrium of the Municipal Building, with ordinary Calgarians talking about their library experiences of the past.