

POST OFFICE TO LIBRARY

The Evolution of the May Memorial Library Building

By EVELYN PARKS*

"The Library is the best building in Burlington" is one of the most frequently heard comments on the May Memorial Library. It was originally built as a Post Office in 1917. At that time "the entire brick order was rejected because the dimensions of the building would have been off $\frac{1}{8}$ inch if they had been used," the Postmaster reported. "Sometimes I wish we were back in that building," he said. The old building has been beautifully and usefully adapted to library use in Burlington. Over the years it has been kept in excellent repair and additional space has been put into use.

When the building was purchased with a gift from the late W. H. May, Sr. and his sons as a memorial to Mrs. W. H. May, Sr., it was twenty years old. Fifteen thousand dollars was paid for a quit lease from the United States Government and the deed was given to the city of Burlington. The story is told that this choice location and good building was not bid on by any business firm because everyone in the community wanted it to be used for a library. At that time it seemed very large for the needs of the county and city of Burlington but the war years brought large industries into the area and population increased more than one hundred per cent between the 1940 and the 1950 U. S. Census. (This was one of the three areas in the state which doubled its population and one of the two in the state to do so without an army installation in the area.)

Early Expansion

For some years only the first floor of the building was used. As the county service through the bookmobile expanded the second floor room was used for books selected for the bookmobile. A small club room was put into use on the same floor. The book collection of the library was widely expanded during this era and additional shelving had to be added on the first floor. An interior decorator was called in. Color schemes were worked out and the decorator's touch made the whole interior more pleasing. On the first floor lighting was improved, floors were covered with rubber tile, and durable, colorful, plastic-upholstered furniture was added. Old Library Bureau equipment was refinished with a limed effect replacing the "golden oak" look. Portraits of Mr. and Mrs. May by Haskell Coffin were appropriate additions.

New Furnace Aids Expansion

The old coal furnace, which had been condemned by the inspectors year after year and then patched up and made to do, was finally replaced early in 1950. A new oil furnace was installed making all of the ground floor more usable. Some of the overhead pipes were moved back against the walls to clear the ceilings in preparation for use of this space for children and young people. By this time one of the ground floor rooms was already in use for bookmobile services and the preparation and mending of books.

The second floor had been renovated to make use of the larger of the two rooms as a conference room. Furnishings for the room were given by the May family and included several handsome Chinese rugs of a beautiful blue. Decorations were planned around this color and were kept in white and sand with a few spots of American Beauty red. A staff room was made out of the smaller room and toilet facilities were installed. Within the next year a kitchen unit was installed in the staff room.

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Recent Renovations

Major renovations of the building were begun in March of 1954. Prior to the beginning of the work, the architect, board members and members of the staff took trips to several of the newer public library buildings in the state: in Salisbury, Winston-Salem and Fayetteville. Many conferences and individual talks were held with representatives of library equipment companies, the staff, the board, and the architect present. Plans were submitted to the library board and approved in April, 1954. In spite of the fact that the building was almost forty years old the foundations and the basic buildings were in good condition. Difficulties arose when materials originally used were no longer available. Areas already in use tended toward the traditional design but this did not deter the use of contemporary ideas in the new area. Eight new rooms were made from the original basement, now the "ground floor." They were: Younger Children's Room, Older Boys and Girls Room, Cataloging and Technical Processing Room, and a Furnace and Maintenance Room.

To cover the unsightly pipes running in all directions, ceilings were lowered to about seven feet and mineral tiles installed over them. Heat pipes were cased in perforated metal tiles leaving them as the source of heat for the new rooms. Plastic tile was laid on all floors. Good lights were recessed into accoustical tiles in all public rooms. Old brick walls were painted over with a cold water paint to which sand and a waterproofing substance had been added.



Photo by Westbrook Studios

Young People's Room

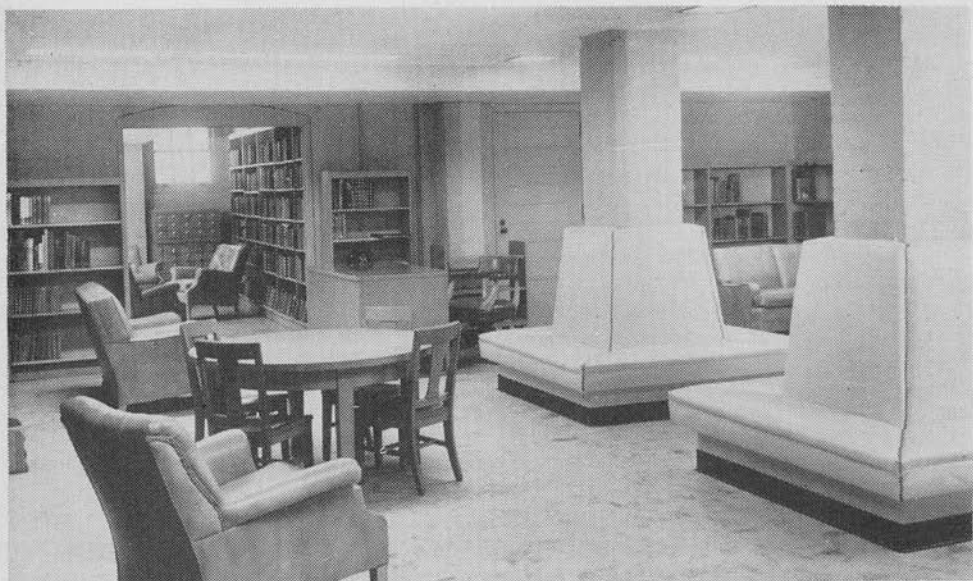


Photo by Westbrook Studios

New Children's Room

Color was used unsparingly, but tastefully. To offset an appearance of many partitions setting off the various rooms, all walls were painted the same shade, a soft aqua tone. This color was softened by the rough texture of the old brick walls. With doors opened a spacious effect was achieved. Light plastic tile floors picked up some of the gray and aqua tones of the walls. Chairs and love seats, made by the Traditional Furniture Company, were upholstered in coral and aqua. Yellow Kalistron over foam rubber was used for four-sided seats around two of the supporting columns of the building. Spots of color helped the appearance of the old furniture in staff offices on the ground floor. The older refinished Library Bureau equipment blended with the light birch shelving and furniture. Perhaps one of the greatest conveniences afforded by this renovation was an additional entrance on the street level. The garage which had been added to the building at the rear and opened on the side street was too small for the inside-service bookmobile. The former garage door was converted to an entrance for the Children and Young People's Rooms. A stairway already in the building just inside the main entrance also affords access to the ground floor.

With three floors of the library in use, vertical transportation of books became a problem. A solution was found by utilizing an old Post Office "catwalk" built to allow postal inspectors to check on employees without being seen. A dumb-waiter was installed in the entrance to one of the catwalks and now serves to carry books between the ground and first floors.

Children Come Into Their Own

Many disheartening things happened to hold up the completion of the work. New hollow steel doors to replace all those on the outside of the building were months being delivered. The devil himself was standing in front of many of our orders. Time lagged

and we all became despondent. Finally the moving day was over and we opened the new areas for the use of the public. It was like a fresh shower after a hot dusty day to see the children come into their own rooms. There was no wild exuberance; they settled into it as easily as if they were putting on a pair of old shoes. Familiar books were there to greet them—what else mattered? They were at home. Contentedly they crawled up into chairs with books and began to read. Some bounced up and down a time or two to try out the new yellow seats around the columns. Their faces at last were above the top the new sitting-height charging desk. And there was a librarian to take care of them without rushing off to grown-up priority. Many people from all over town came in to see what had happened to that "sooty" old area where they worked on bandages during the war years or where they had gone to talk about some federal revenue regulation. "My mother told me to come in and see it," said one girl just home from college. "I wish I had all my years to live over when I could have enjoyed this." Many a business man steps through the new entrance to look around on his way from the office building just up the street to his car in the parking lot. "You should have seen it before," said a young insurance man to a friend whom he had brought by. One of the most appreciate visitors and one who helped most with the planning of it was Mr. W. H. May, Sr. The last place he visited before going to Florida, where he died early in the fall, was the new area of the library. He didn't think he would like the yellow benches but he thought the children probably would.

Plan Services for Business and Industry

The future of the library lies in the development of the services to business and industry in Alamance County. A special room on the ground floor has been furnished for this service; and a small collection of books is shelved separately on the main floor to provide a nucleus of material. The next step is to work with local industries and business people towards the books and other materials in their fields. Last year the request for a business and technical librarian was included in the budget; the request will probably be repeated this year.

More Space Needed

The utilization of the ground floor space has added more than 3500 square feet to our building; but it does not yet take care of our present needs. If we continue to keep the open spaces on the first floor which are desirable, we cannot put in any more free standing stacks. Although half the number of new books added each year are discarded each year, the shelves are overcrowded. Office space is used to full capacity. Where do we go from here? Is the next step to plan a new building; or is the worth of this one too great to tear it down and begin anew? The location is in the heart of the business district. We know that other libraries are facing the same problems in trying to make-do with what they have, and in trying to determine what next to do.

We would like to have an audio-visual room, a music room, an added conference room for small groups, a larger periodical and reference room. Our growing pains are only beginning.