

THE CRETE PUBLIC LIBRARY

(Excerpted from *CRETE REMEMBERED*
by Carol Triebold and Phyllis Monks)

Until after the turn of the 20th century, libraries were fairly rare institutions in small communities. Crete was no exception. Not until 1929 did Crete see the first effort in that direction. The public school board made an attempt to build a small community library by adding some new books to those on hand. The board also encouraged donations of appropriate books from patrons toward a permanent library.

In November 1929 during National Library month, about forty to fifty books were added to the library, donated by the pupils. It became known as the Summer Library as it was open to the public during the summer months.

After World War II, the development of school libraries took off as educators became aware of the importance of libraries. Elementary schools with classroom collections often became the core of the collection when public libraries were formed.

By June 1946, the *Chicago Heights Star* informed readers, "Under the sponsorship of the Crete PTA, the Public School Library opened Wednesday of this week. It will be open to the public from 2 until 4 on Wednesday afternoons during the summer months. One hundred books have been borrowed from the state library to add to the school collection. An invitation is extended to everyone in Crete Township to use the books and magazines." The materials could be borrowed for a period of two weeks.

Adult books loaned to the school library for the summer included best sellers such as *Random Harvest* by James Hilton, *Mrs. Miniver* by Jan Struther, *The Moon is Down* by John Steinbeck, *Our Hearts were Young and Gay* by Cornelia Otis Skinner, *The Problems of Lasting Peace* by Herbert Hoover and Hugh Gibson, and *Western Star* by Stephen Vincent Benet.

A more substantial library got off the ground as a result of efforts by the Crete Inter-Organizational Planning Council. Formed in the early 60s, the Council was composed of representatives from many local groups and organizations who assembled to coordinate community events. In 1963, they appointed a committee of three—Marian Engel, Audrey DeMuth, and Joanne Croissant—to look into the possibility of starting a library. The three became a Steering Committee that formed the first independent library in Crete. It began life Nov. 24, 1963, with 800 donated books in two donated rooms and a staff of one. It was open just 14 hours a week.

The two rooms were donated by Gibb and Adele Fink in what was the historic old home of Dr. Charles Blim at the northeast corner of North and Benton Streets. The first room, 14 x 20, had been the doctor's parlor, and the second was his examining room.

A professional librarian was hired part time. Renate Thienot, a Park Forest resident originally from Germany, received her library science education from the University of Freiburg there.

The library was able to open largely thanks to generous donations from individuals and community groups. They included \$500 from the Crete AMVETS, \$150 from the AMVETS Auxiliary, \$300 from the Crete Lions Club, \$200 from the Lincolnshire Improvement Association, \$150 from a 4-H Club, \$100 from W. J. Luecke, and \$500 from Charles Seehausen Sr. He contributed a total of \$1,700 in the first three years. Other contributions to the library included furniture, and services; Senior Girl Scout Troop 301 assisted with cataloguing and shelving books.

A book drive brought in good used books for the library. Collection boxes for books were set up at Seehausen's Certified and Lyman's Pharmacy, as well as in some homes.

Family memberships at \$2 per family per year were established to help maintain and enlarge the library. One thousand library cards were printed and donated by Spindler-Koelling Funeral Home.

The first trustees were: Irma Batterman, elected the library board's first President; Kenneth Soderland, Morris Keyser, Fern Leiteritz, Marian Barrett, Herb Schlinkert, and Charles Seehausen. Mrs. Batterman recalls that the board members were really "hands-on." They washed windows, hung drapes made by Fern Leiteritz, painted, built shelving, (as did Gibb Fink on numerous occasions), and were a real working board. They also sorted books and pasted in the pockets.

In April 1964, the doctor's waiting room became the third room of the library. The book collection had grown to 3,000 volumes and circulation had increased to 5,327 by the end of 1964. Also in 1964, a Friends of the Library group was formed for added financial support, but it later petered out.

A library referendum was held in January 1966, establishing for the first time a free, public tax-supported library for the Village of Crete. It was no longer a hand-to-mouth operation solely dependent on the public spirit of donors. The Crete Public Library joined the Suburban Library System in May 1967. By 1969, it was estimated the library had 8,799 books, and circulation was over 19,000. The fledgling library had come a long way in the short six years since its birth. But greater things were in store for it.

With library circulation and services expanding, the library moved to the first floor of an apartment building owned by Gibb and Adele Fink at 534 First Street on Oct. 19, 1969. After three years of donating space to the library, the Finks finally began collecting rent. Here the library continued to grow, and three rooms were added to the original rented area within ten years. The move coincided with the departure of Librarian Renate Thienot, as she left the area. Anne Pehrkon, who had worked part time for the library for three years, was elevated to Librarian. The library boosted its time open to 28 hours a week.

In 1973, the Hager property at the northeast corner of Main and North Streets was purchased as a possible location for a permanent library home. Originally the home of Crete's first Village President, Charles Horn Sr., and then owned by his son-in-law, Joe Hager, it was offered at the bargain price of \$36,500. Later, it became clear that the historic house was not structurally sound enough to hold thousands of books and the land parcel was considered too small to build a library on as well as provide the necessary parking for the growing Crete population. The Hager house was used as a library annex for a time, as well as offices, storage, and some programs. It was later rented out as a residence and ultimately sold in 1990 for \$80,000.

In 1984, the space occupied by the Crete Record and Steger News was converted to library use and the entire first floor of the building now housed the library. The book collection grew to 22,000 volume, with a circulation of 640,000 by 1979.

The Suburban Library System (SLS) continued to augment the collection from its vast resources through inter-library loan. Now called the Metropolitan Library System, it is part of a statewide network of public, school and specialized libraries.

By 1979, the library staff headed by Anne Pehrkon included Donna Vince, assistant librarian; Martha Schlagel, a clerk who later became the longtime children's librarian; Carol Bruns, who began as children's librarian and later became head of adult services; and Barbara Cox. Schlagel, Bruns and Cox all served the library for more than 25 years before their retirement, and Bruns still comes in to work a few hours a week despite her official retirement in 2000. Ellen Herrmann, who joined the staff in 1984, is now head of the Reference Department. Another loyal longtime employee was Lucille Kester.

In February 1985, the library was converted to a stand-alone library district in a referendum, moving it out from under the village umbrella. In a second successful referendum in November that same year, the library district annexed all the unincorporated area of Crete Township not already served by another library. This more than doubled its population served and broadened the tax base. Some 86% of village voters and 80% of the township voters approved the measure.

In 1987, Anne Pehrkon retired and Sharon Wsol became the Administrative Librarian. An experienced librarian with a master's in library science from the University of Chicago, she guided the library through its expansion and to its first permanent building.

After a telephone survey in 1987-88 to determine the need for a library building, a site consultant was hired in February 1989. A citizens library committee was established to study needs, and advise the board, which began to look at sites.

The board reviewed 17 sites throughout the township, settling on a 7.7 acre site at 1177 N. Main Street, which cost \$99,750. The fire department agreed to burn down the old Koelling home on the site. The board opted to use the front three acres for the building site, leaving the rest in its natural, mostly wooded state.

Later, building and financial consultants were hired. They recommended a 24,500 square foot building that could serve the library district's expected population of 30,000 for the next 10-20 years. In August 1991, the board retained the architectural firm of LZT/Filliung of Glen Ellyn.

In March 1992, two referenda were put to the voters; sell \$3.65 million in bonds for a new building, and increase the library tax rate to operate the new library, for a total tax increase of 19 ½ cents. Both issues failed.

In November 1993, a new referendum was approved for a pared down \$2.975 million library building program, retaining the 24,500 square foot size.

After two rounds of bids came in too high, and the project's costs were pared down, Oliver Structures of Montgomery, IL., was awarded the general construction contract in October 1994, for \$2,669,100.

Groundbreaking took place on June 25, 1994. Turning shovels of dirt were board members Rose Marie Foley, board president; Marian Engel, Jim Adams, Frank Shepley, Herb Schultz, Shirley Murray and Randall Mucha. Also taking a turn were State Senator Aldo DeAngelis and Illinois Lt. Governor George Ryan, as well as Administrative Librarian Sharon Wsol.

Construction began in earnest in January 1995, and the building was completed in March 1996, six months later than anticipated due to weather-related delays, but coming in under budget. After 33 years in rented quarters, the Crete Library had a home of its own. The structure was designed to accommodate an addition to the north when growth warrants it.

The library was dedicated on May 26, 1996, during Memorial Day weekend. Among those present at the dedication were Irma Batterman, an original board member (1963-77); two of the three original steering committee members, Marian Engel and Audrey DeMuth; and Gilbert Fink, who had provided the first library space in the old Blim home free for three years, and the larger quarters in the rental building. Also present at the ceremony was Congressman Jerry Weller, who presented the library with a flag flown over the United States Capitol.

A patio at the rear of the library was donated by the Crete Woman's Club. In 1993, the Library Foundation sold commemorative pavers for a walkway to the patio. Donors paid \$50 for a small 4 x 8 inch paver or \$100 for a large 8 x 8 inch paver to be engraved in memory of a loved one.

Jane Schulten, a Crete resident (MLS, University of Pittsburgh), became the Administrative Librarian in 1998. She has introduced many innovations, such as The Coffee Connection, a coffee bar in the second floor hall operated as a school-library joint venture by special needs students from Crete-Monee High School.

Today, the library is assisted by its fund-raising arm in the Crete Library Foundation, established in 1994. Another hard-working group is the Friends of the Library, founded in 1989. Integral to the library's operation is the online catalogue system known as SWAN.

After three abortive tries, an operating tax increase referendum finally passed in 2006 and a year later, the library was able to reopen on Fridays and restore other budget cuts as that tax money began augmenting the budget.