

# History of the Northwest Regional Library System

## A Historical Perspective

Bay County's first library was established in 1911 in Lynn Haven through the efforts of the "Women's Literary Club." As interest in establishing a library in Panama City grew, editorials appeared in the *Panama City Pilot* newspapers and citizens wrote letters to the editor. On November 20, 1913, an [article](#) in the *Pilot* reported several reasons why every community should have a public library:

*"Public libraries are an essential part of a complete educational system...Society is required to educate the man of forty just as much as the boy of five...The library helps workers do their work...The library furnishes rest, relief and recreation for tired workers...The public library helps make intelligent citizens...By its cooperative principle, the library makes one dollar do the work of many."*



**McMullin Branch of the Bay County Library located in Lynn Haven**

How well this writer understood the public library. The article continued:

*"Panama City could scarcely do a public act that would be as beneficial as starting a public library. The town shouldn't have a library that is simply a collection of books upon the shelves"*

*that are only now and then referred to. No library should be started without the adoption from the beginning of a perfect system, both as to the selection, care, and distribution of the books but as to the means by which the library shall accomplish the greatest good to the greatest number."*

Citizens interested in forming a library met in January 1914 and formed an organization called "The Panama City Library Association." It was several months later before the library was actually established.

Through the years to come, the Women's Club played a major role in the development of the public library in Bay County. Though many people of the community tried to keep the library open, the library didn't have a place to call its own. In fact, the library moved so many times that it was often referred to as "the traveling library."

In 1939, Miss Bessie Norton, librarian of the high school, spearheaded an organization called "Friends of the Bay County Free Public Library." Two WPA workers were assigned to the library of forty books, one table, and one chair. All that was needed was a building to call its own. The citizens of the community rallied to the library cause and a partially finished building was located in Washington Park next to the Post Office on Jenks Avenue. Through great effort, money was raised, and on September 10, 1941 the building in Washington Park was dedicated as a library.



**Bay County Public Library located at 411 Jenks Avenue**

The library had two rooms and one bathroom and shared the building with the Chamber of Commerce. Library books were checked out by hand stamp; bookshelves were so full that many returned books had

to be stacked on top of the card catalog or the floor. As one library patron said: *"One visits the Bay County Public Library only if he is entirely free of claustrophobia."* It was a great day when the Chamber of Commerce moved into a new building and the other two rooms and bathroom were available to the library.

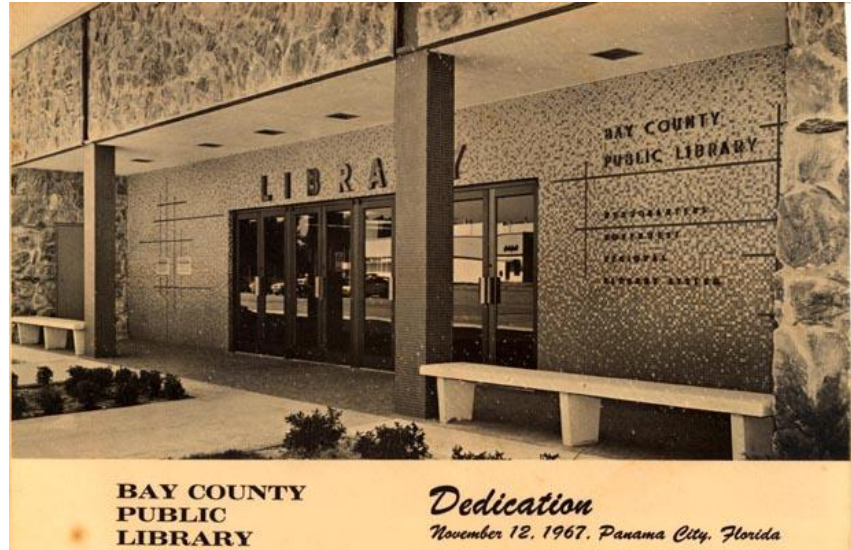
By 1960, the library had almost doubled its services. We had a bookmobile and the McMullen Library in Lynn Haven became a part of the county system. In September 1960, the Bay County Free Public Library was incorporated as the Bay County Public Library Association, Inc. The Association contracted with the Bay County Board of Commissioners to provide library services to our citizens. In 1962, the library purchased a second bookmobile and the Association contracted with Washington County and formed the Northwest Regional Library System.



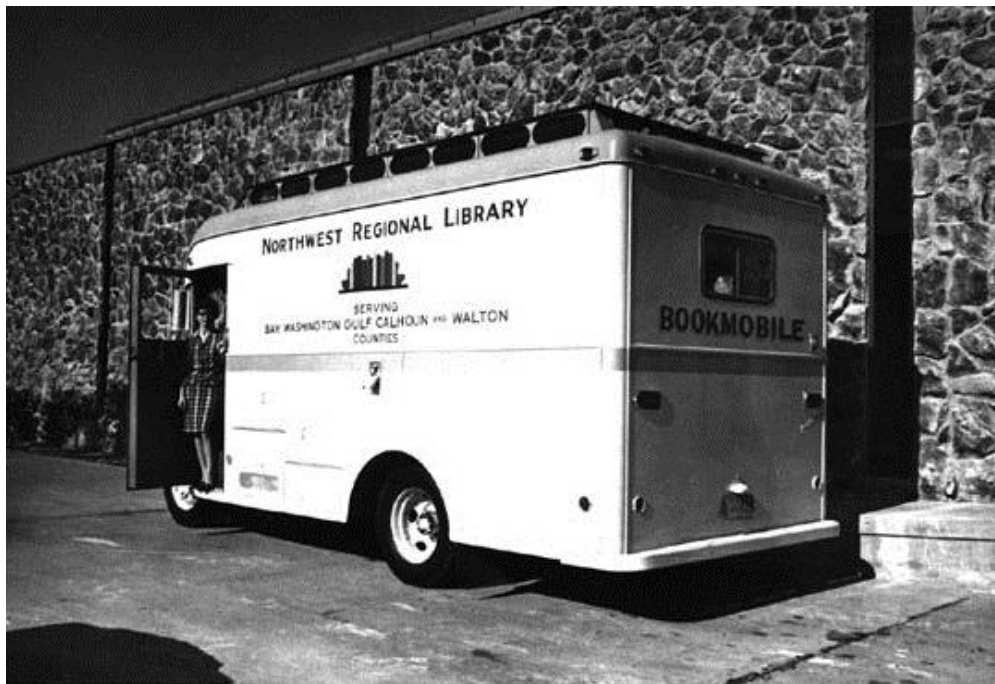
**Bay County Public Library Bookmobile at stop.**

In 1962, the Bay County Public Library was also in the middle of a building fund campaign. The land and buildings in Washington Park were sold to the federal government and the library moved again - to the Christo Dime Store building on Harrison Avenue. We were to be in the storefront for only a year, but, three years later, we were still there and growing - Gulf, Calhoun, and Walton Counties joined the library system.

In May 1967, the library building on the City Marina was completed and it was time to move again. With typical thrift, the library staff, a few volunteers and the Boy Scouts moved the bulk of 60,000 volumes into the new building. Library Director Jane Patton reminded the staff: "...although we (now) have a beautiful new building, library service and people are still more important."



Library Director, Jane Patton (1970); BCPL located at 25 W. Government St. at the Marina



Northwest Regional Library Bookmobile at the Marina with Ann Robbins standing at the door.

As the Sixties gave way to the Seventies, Walton County withdrew from the System. In 1973 and 1974, Liberty and Holmes Counties joined the Northwest Regional Library System; we served six counties covering 3,946 square miles.

The end of the Seventies brought more changes to the library. Springfield Public Library opened. During the height of the gas shortage, the library decided to discontinue bookmobile library service. There were a lot of good memories of riding the highways and dirt roads on the "bookmobile trail," but times were

changing. A federally-funded program, Mail-a-Book Library Service, took the place of the bookmobiles until funds for that project ended.

The Eighties began with a new library building at Panama City Beach. The early Eighties were lean years; federal funding - library project grants, federal revenue sharing funds, and public employment funds - were slashed or eliminated. Open hours were reduced, book budgets cut, employees laid off. Under new administration in 1985, the library began a restructuring program to improve services by reorganizing staff and collections. George Vickery was hired as Library Director. New funding structures for regional and municipal libraries were implemented. In 1986, Calhoun County Library received additional local funding and withdrew from the System to form its own county-wide system.



**Genie Lloyd (Library Board member); George Vickery (Library Director),  
and Linda Grantham (Library Board member) at Reception for new Library Director**

By the turn of the decade, the stress of limited funding began to take its toll throughout the system. Reductions to the ad valorem tax base made it difficult for funding agencies to increase or even sustain library appropriations. In 1991, Washington County withdrew from the system; in 1992, Holmes County and Lynn Haven libraries withdrew.

In 1992, the State Library recognized that smaller, rural counties were in serious need of assistance - library services were being threatened. In recognition of the vast variation in financial resources among Florida counties and regions, rules governing the State Aid to Libraries Program were revised to include an equalization formula that was structured to provide an effective supplement to local funds and provide multi-county grants as an incentive for counties to join together to provide cost-effective library service. While the discrepancy in financial resources has not been overcome, the investment in public library service by the state enables NWRLS libraries to better meet the needs of the "information society" of the future.

Although the Nineties began with some downward trends, it also opened with dramatic technological changes for the library. The project to convert the system's holdings into machine-readable format was completed. "Intelligent Catalogs" of the system's holdings were placed in all the libraries. These CD-ROM catalogs and computerized circulation systems provide information on and access to the materials available in System libraries.

In 2003, the City of Wewahitchka completed a construction project for a new 4,700 square foot library. And in 2006, the Gulf County Library Advisory Board in coordination with the Friends of the Library and the Board of County Commissioners completed a 1,000 square foot addition to the library in Port St. Joe.

In 2006 the Bay County Board of Commissioners voted to incorporate the Bay County Public Library as a department of Bay County. Previously, the Library was managed by the Bay County Public Library Association, a not-for-profit organization. That change became effective April 1, 2007. The Commission had also voted to buy a tract of land on West 11th Street the location of an old shopping center. The location was to become a County Administration Complex, with a new library being the first building on site.

In March 2007, Library Director George Vickery retired after 22 years of service. In April 2007, County Commissioners appointed long-time Assistant Library Director Joyce Dannecker to Interim Director. They appointed her director in February 2008.



**George Vickery Retired in 2007; Joyce Dannecker became Library Director in 2008.**

The new library at 898 West 11th Street took a full year to build. The library opened for business on May 16, 2008. County Commission Chairman Jerry Girvin addressed the standing room only crowd at the opening ceremony. Commissioners Mike Nelson, George Gainer, William Dozier, and Mike Thomas helped cut the ribbon. Chairman Girvin checked out the first book in the new building.



**Bay County Public Library at 898 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street**

Also present at the opening and supporting the library's efforts throughout all stages was the Library Advisory Committee appointed by the County Commissioners. Led by Chairman Rayford Lloyd, they were Jim Boyd, Jr., Adelaide Ware, Andy Schuller, and Doug Gilmore.

With approximately 55,000 square feet on one floor, the new building is more than twice the size of the old one. With two wings, one for Youth Services and one for Adult Services, and a Meeting Room complex with restrooms and a kitchenette, the new building offers improved facilities and conveniences.

Joyce Dannecker retired as Library Director in 2009 and Deanne Coffield, Administrative Services Manager and Chief Financial Officer, was named Interim Director. Robin Shader became Library Director on August 2, 2010.

The Northwest Regional Library System was affected by Hurricane Michael on October 10, 2018. The Parker Public Library lost part of the roof of the building and had to undergo extensive repairs. The Springfield Public Library is no longer one of the NWRLS locations since the building was needed to be used for the Springfield City Hall.

***This article was compiled from previous histories written by staff members Ann Robbins and Joyce Dannecker that have appeared, in part, in *The Heritage of Bay County, Florida* volumes I & II.***