

History of the Siuslaw Public Library

"A reading room is one of the needs of Florence. Some place should be provided where strangers can go to spend a little time in reading when they happen to be in town, and where laboring men can spend their evenings quietly and pick up some information about current events or glean some knowledge on some subject in which they are interested. A few papers and magazines could be obtained regularly and perhaps some books donated to which more can be added later. Who will take up the matter and see what can be done?"

Editorial by W.H. Weatherson in *"The West"*, September 25, 1914

The Siuslaw Public Library dates its beginning as an important part of the life of Florence to May 7, 1915. It was on that date that the Women's Conservation League opened the doors of Florence's first library in the Commercial Club, a forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce. Several months later, the library received its first book donation from the state library (42 volumes of a traveling collection). The library also had 100 donated books and free pamphlets with such titles as: "Removal of garlic flavor from milk and cream," "How to prevent typhoid fever," and baby and child care brochures. Mrs. John Safley was the first librarian.

"Thanks to the Siuslaw Women's Conservation League and the assistance of the Commercial Club, Florence can now boast of a public library. While the number of books is not large, yet a beginning has been made and the people will have a better chance to obtain reading matter than they would otherwise."

Editorial by W.H. Weatherson in *"The West"*, July 23, 1915

In the intervening years the library had a number of different homes in addition to the Commercial Club – the Kyle building, rooms in the old bank building, the Masonic Hall, and the old grade school (later the Callison Building). The library was moved once by wheelbarrow!

In 1936 the Oregon State Highway Commission donated two small construction buildings, located in Glenada, to the library after its completion of the bridge over the Siuslaw River. Florence city officials moved the buildings by truck to an area behind the old Cooper building on Bay Street. The library was named the Anne Dudley Memorial Library for a long-time librarian and a reception was held on December 10, 1936, to open the new building with its 900-volume collection.

"This institution is a real credit to Florence and is largely due to the untiring efforts of the librarian who has kept at it until a small handful of books housed first here and there has developed into 900 volumes, properly cataloged and now in a commodious shelving where there is plenty of room to grow."

"The Oar", December 11, 1936

The newly organized Board of Directors of the Florence Public Library held its first meeting in January of 1952, with Mary Andreasen serving as President. Alice Hanson was hired as librarian. Years later, at her retirement, Mrs. Hanson recalled that “she didn’t know beans” about running a library, but board president Andreasen told her: “we learn together.” In fact, the following year, a representative of the State Library visited Florence and instructed the librarian and the library board “how to catalogue and index the books according to the standard procedure.”

In February of 1955, after forty years, the Florence City Council formally legalized the status of the Florence Public Library, thereby making it a department of city government.

“After 40 years, Florence city council has gotten around to legalizing the Florence Public Library. The prophetic words of the late editor W.H. Weatherson in “The West” back in 1915 that the library would be accepted by the city when the council got around to it have been fulfilled!”

“The Oar”, February 11, 1955

In 1965 the Florence Public Library celebrated its 50th anniversary and a lengthy history was published in the Siuslaw News.

“Present librarian on duty Mrs. Alice N. Hanson, stated that the library now has 6616 volume books on its shelves, with approximately 607 persons actively using library cards. The Florence Public Library is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. Its value to the people is limited only by the use they make of it. Its purpose is, and always has been, to serve.”

“The Siuslaw News”, June 3, 1965

On July 29, 1966, Florence voters okayed a \$150,000 bond issue for the construction of a new combination city hall and library. The new facility was located on Highway 101 just north of the Siuslaw River bridge.

A “Friends of the Library” group was organized in 1977 to help support the library by raising funds, sponsoring cultural events, gathering community support, and encouraging private donations. Just five years later, the local newspaper reported:

“The Friends’ five year affair with the library has been a successful one and if the couple stays together it’s likely to be busy at the Florence Public Library for the next few years.”

“The Siuslaw News”, June 17, 1982

In June of 1984 the voters of Florence approved a proposal initiated by Library Director Michael Gaston and a citizens’ panel for the creation of the Siuslaw Public Library District that encompassed not only the town of Florence but also the area from Dunes City on the south to Heceta Beach on the north and from the coast east to Cushman. With the approval of funding for the library district in a September 1984 referendum, the library district officially went into business on July 1, 1985.

“Florence and the surrounding communities have outgrown their current library. The need for more space will become ever more acute as the area grows. Remaining in the current location is not an option. Voters should support the library bond issue and begin planning to celebrate its opening...”

Editorial in *“The Siuslaw News”*, undated

Finally, in December of 1990, after the successful \$1.5 million bond issue passed with a 70% majority, a new 15,000 square-foot building was completed and opened to the public. The land for the library was purchased with funds left to the library by Elsie Johnson. Ms. Johnson, a frequent library patron, had been the head librarian of the Florence Library in the 1920’s!

The latest installment in the creation of the present-day Siuslaw Public Library District was the enlargement of the district to include the areas surrounding the Lane County communities of Mapleton, Swisshome, and Deadwood. This was accomplished in 1993 and doubled the area of Lane County served by the library district. In May of 1996, the Mapleton branch library facility was relocated from a 500-square-foot storefront on Highway 126 to two remodeled rooms in the historic Mapleton school building owned by the Lion’s Club.

Full shelves, not enough work and storage space, and limited parking led to a decision to further expand the Florence library facility in the early 2000’s. A successful campaign to solicit donations was undertaken, although a ballot measure failed by 132 out of 7,680 votes cast. Additional donations, Urban Renewal funds, and funds raised by an estate bequeathed to the library by Linda Buck resulted in a successful campaign project. The library addition was completed in 2010, and public art in the form of Mack Holman’s statue “Joy” was dedicated in March 2013.

The history of library service in western Lane County is one of progress and growth. The citizens served by the Siuslaw Public Library District can be grateful to the tireless dedication of the countless number of library staff, board members, Friends, and volunteers who have made possible one of the best public libraries in Oregon.