

**Centennial
Reflections**
*Essays from the
Oakwood Historical Society*

The Oakwood library – 1913 to present

By Harry G. Ebeling



The house on Park Avenue (now the Little Exchange) that served as Oakwood's library from 1924 to 1939.



Sketch of the Wright Memorial Library today (Artist David L. Smith)

Oakwood's Wright Memorial Library has been a symbol of the community's interest in and dedication to knowledge and education since its inception in 1913. A library was established by the efforts of the Oakwood Efficiency League in 1913 when it acquired 100 books through donation and set up shop at "Briar Hill," the home of the Parrotts on

Oakwood Avenue. Although no longer there, the location is proudly proclaimed on the stone posts at 1300. N. C.R. met the challenge with another 100 books whose titles were listed in The Oakwood Record.

The school board, which was undertaking a bond issue for the new school, promised a permanent home. In 1916, it created a library with seven members on the board and began buying books with school funds. The library was open only a few hours a week and was staffed by teachers until it hired its first librarian, Gretchen Smalley, in 1919. It closed briefly in 1922 for lack of funds because of the new high school being planned, but in 1923 a new library board, headed by John R. Fletcher, was appointed.

Fletcher, who owned a large lot extending from Dixon Avenue to Park Avenue, donated a small house for the library in 1924. The house was turned around and moved to face Park Avenue. This was the first real Oakwood Library building, setting out with 1,550 books, with Aimee Clunet and Jane McMaster as librarians. The little wooden house, not designed for such use, quickly became inadequate, so that by 1937, despite the Depression, the Library Board with the blessing of the school board, voted to place a \$40,000 bond issue on the ballot. Using a gift from Orville Wright to promote the campaign, it was successful, and our Wright Memorial Library was born.

The name was suggested by the Garden Club in honor of the Wright family, Orville, Wilbur and Katherine, whose pictures are in the right hand reading room. A bronze plaque inside the entrance honors John O. Fletcher who died in 1925. The fact that he had restricted his gift for library purposes for 25 years was dodged by leasing it to Mrs. Mead for the Little Exchange which she was establishing.

Designed by Schenck & Williams in the Tudor tradition favored by them and built on land owned by the city and leased to the library for 99 years (renewable at \$1.00 per year), the new library was dedicated in February, 1939. The land, originally part of the John Shroyer quarter section, had been owned by Emma Conover who had inherited it from Henry Long in 1898. In 1925 she had sold it to Wm. F. Cappel, who sold it to the city in 1928. Nell Gunter and Jane McMaster served as librarians until the move to the new building when Catherine Hadler took the reins, followed by Eva Leach in 1952.

In 1964, freed of the restrictions of Fletchers' gift, the library board sold Park Ave. and used the proceeds to add a new wing, remodel and add air conditioning. Thelma Yakura began her tenure as librarian in 1965 and oversaw the 1972 addition, which was financed by the Montgomery County Intangibles Tax. The floor space was doubled to 13,800 sq. ft., providing a children's room and public stack area, space for 8,000 more books, a meeting room, book processing department, and a staff lounge.

In 1982, the overflowing stacks and deterioration of the building forced a decision to make major improvements. Further monies were sought from Montgomery County, and with the guidance of Lecklider & Jay Architects, an addition with remodeling was undertaken to enlarge the building by 9,850 sq. ft. to a total of 23,650 sq. ft. This provided a new lower entrance, relocation of the service desk and offices, the addition of the children's room and audio-visual room, as well as the large community room. In 1989, Yakura, the longest serving librarian retired and was replaced by Toni Walder. She was killed in a tragic traffic accident in 2003 and was succeeded by Ann Snively, a long term employee.

Despite the valuable services and attractive building, the citizens of Oakwood rejected a 1.98 mil levy in for the library in 2005. This is relatively unheard of in Oakwood. It had lived off the state Intangible Tax until 1987 which was paid to the counties and split up among the libraries. The change in the law was to a percentage of the personal income tax which is supposed to be 5.7 percent, but the state has frozen that amount since 2004 at the 2003 level, so that libraries don't get that percentage. The 2005 defeat cost a projected \$539,000 per year for each of the following five years. This shortfall has meant some material changes in the programs, hours of operation, purchases and personnel.

Peoples' needs and desires in library services change and Wright Library is always looking to meet them. Use of the Web-site is increasing, as is the use of computers and wireless connection for on-line services. Children's summer programs are offered to 600 young people. The library participates in a state wide "Every Child Ready to Read" initiative to develop reading skills. After school programs provide for school age children of two working parents.

Over the years there have been some remarkable citizens who have contributed to the success of the Wright Library. Only space prevents me from repeating stories of Orville Wright's participation on the board. Newspaperman Max Kohnop served as president of the board from 1934 to 1976 and continued on the board until 1981. Thelma Yakura who served as librarian for 24 years, kept files about local history on which we still rely