

Millbrook Free Library's historical role in education.

by Julie Gibbs

Since it was founded at the turn of the century, the Millbrook Free Library has always made it a top priority to provide a good selection of quality books along with a variety of educational activities in the children of Millbrook and Washington. More than just a place to check out a nice picture book, the library has always been a community center, providing many children with their first educational and cultural experiences.

Early education

At the first annual meeting on July 3, 1903, the following concern was expressed: "The largest percentage of the Library is undoubtedly by the school children — hence special anxiety that the juvenile department of the Library have as many and as attractive additions as possible."

The 1915 annual report describes the first regularly scheduled school class visits to the library: "The response, especially from the lower grades has been immediate and hearty. The children are not only learning to use the Library intelligently now, but unconsciously they are forming the habit of regarding this place as one where they would like to be, and where they themselves without aid, can make delightful discoveries in the world of books. This means much for the future both for them and for us, for the highest aim of a library should be to obtain recognition as a place to be visited with delight and not as a mere necessity."

In 1918, 16 classes per week were held in the library, "the main object being to have the children form the reading habit." In fact, during its first 30 years, the library served as both the high school and public library until 1933, when state law required all high schools to have their own libraries.

A cultural center for kids

Since 1921, the library has steadily added children's programs. Story hours, Children's



Book Week, book exhibitions, contests with prizes, plays, movie screenings, book parties

complete with stories and dancing, workshops in book binding, nature study classes, stamp clubs, butterfly and moth exhibitions and Native American craft and foreign doll collection exhibitions are just some of the many children's activities that have enriched the lives of local children for the better part of this century.

A 1922 annual library report says, "Nearly five hundred visitors came to the library during these six days (Children's Book Week) and several gifts made possible the inclusion of many beautiful editions of standard titles in juvenile books."

Clearly, quality reading for children has always been a priority at the Millbrook Free Library and continues to be so today. In 1923, the library listed some of the "choice" books for children that it offered, such as the "Book of Princes by Howard Pyle, "Arabian Nights," "Goosey, Goosey-Goosey Series," "The Prince and the Peppercorn," "Rip Van Winkle," "Pied Piper in Pudding Land," "Don Quixote," and illustrated editions of "Ivanhoe" and "David Copperfield." These are all timeless titles that children continue to enjoy even to the present day.

In 1943, a report named favorites with children like "Oliver Twist," "Alice," and "Wind in the Willows." Apparently, children devoured new adventures stories. "These are novel readers when not tied down with home work," stated the library secretary. "This is the egocentric stage and all suggestions must be approached with caution. When a child signs his first registration card he joins an institution which offers him the best of the world's reading, books for life."



DISTINGUISHED GUESTS OF THE LIBRARY: This photo was taken in 1924 of Barbara and Betty Olin. The girls dressed up as their favorite book characters in their great aunt Carrie Haviland's childhood dresses as part of the November 1924 Children's Book Week activities. Katherine Robinson was third prize as Pippa in a charming Italian peasant costume in which she did an attractive Italian dance with Fanny Ciferri. (Photo submitted.)

A 1925 report records "... a delightful hour of reading aloud was given them by Mrs. Myles Standish. In 1935, "Mrs. Coughlin theme has kindly read poetry to a group of children, and the hour was truly appreciated." Other contributors to story hour are Mrs. Morgan Wray and Miss Lilla Davidson and Mrs. Hugh Collins are also mentioned.

In 1929, Librarian Mary Lillian

twice the size of Aunt Daisy Trarwood. If at a busy hour I suggested that a small acquirer should carve a little off a very determined chin, it was rather disconcerting to find at the next glance that the profile had assumed the expression of a fish."

An institution with a mission

In fact, the library staff and trustees were quite clear about their mission to instill good reading habits in the children of the community. It was not merely a matter of learning to read and reading often, but of reading quality books. Many years before television sets and computers, books were a main influence. Consider, for example, this excerpt from 1924 which exemplifies the influence the right or wrong reading material might have over a child. "The responsibility of developing good taste in children's reading has become of universal concern," the trustees wrote. "Ideas of truth and beauty and loveliness will not be instilled by the comic supplement. Before these mischievous sheets have had the chance to cheapen and falsify the baby's ideas, before he has had time to translate his impressions into actions he should have good picture books. There was never a time when good artists were so busily employed turning out their best for children in books that give vivid impressions of color and beauty."

In 1926, the library staff wrote, "If at the moment we present to the child just the right food for his curiosity and eagerness — folklore, fairy tale and fable, song, science, adventure, handicrafts and games, each when the appropriate faculty is unfolding — then we can keep him curious and eager all through his childhood. Nothing better can happen to a child."

The librarians kept meticulous records of how many books were read by school children each year. "In the Third Grade, between September, 1924 and July, 1925, forty pupils have read over twelve hundred books, and in the Second

Grade of High School one boy has read two hundred and seventy-five books during the year, while the total of the books read by the pupils of our schools from July 1, 1924 to June 15, 1925 is 8,322."

In 1934, the library staff expressed concern with the percentage of children's books on hand. "Eighty-two percent of the collections of the high library are children's books, the norm is 28% and ours is only 15%. In a community of about four hundred registered school children, 90% of whom have library cards, this is a very weak spot. It is of vital importance to keep the juvenile shelves fresh and attractive with good editions." The impassioned writer goes on, "Nevertheless, it is in the children's department that the foundation of good taste in literature is laid, as well as in the few acts of living."

In 1949, the library reported 10,396 volumes on the shelves, 2,167 of them juvenile. "Had we more space we would add considerable to our children's book stock."

Every year, the library staff and trustees write an extensive report on the happenings of Children's Book Week. In 1923, library president and founder Harry Barbours Flagler wrote, "To the question sometimes asked, 'Why Book Week when so much and such good reading matter is on hand in our library all through the year?' we would answer in general that concentration of effort along any particular line at stated times is bound not only to intensify already existing interest, but to open new channels of endeavor and thus add to the permanent value of the work in hand."

A report in a 1936 Millbrook Round Table article sums up the philosophy of the function of books in the lives of children well. It reads, "The familiarity of a report does not yield to the fascination of a year with children and their books; and events are no measure of its significance."