

## **More than books**

### **It's not your grandmother's library**

It may not be your grandmother's library, but I hope it is still Mrs. Popp's library.

Often, when I talk to groups and organizations about stereotypes of libraries and librarians, I contrast today's library with the library of my childhood in Flint, Michigan. I still remember the repressive quiet of the venerable Carnegie Library, its Adult Collection that was strictly off limits to me, and, especially, the librarians who were mean as snakes.

I tell people, "It's not your grandmother's library anymore." I go on to explain that today's libraries are no longer simply a repository for books, that today's libraries are More Than Books on a Shelf. Then I go on to list and describe some of the materials and services a modern library offers.

### **Mrs. Popp**

When I moved to Freeport in 2004, I made a lot of initial presentations to local organizations, especially service clubs, as a way of introducing myself to the community. Time after time, whenever I mentioned those mean librarians at the Flint Public Library, someone in the audience would recall Mrs. Popp.

"Mrs. Popp" was a long-retired but not forgotten children's librarian at Freeport Library who created happy memories of the library for the children of Freeport. When I asked people about her, however, their memories were fairly vague.

"What was her first name?" I asked. "I only knew her as Mrs. Popp," was invariably the reply. "What do you remember about her?" "She was a good storyteller." "She was little, and she was fun." "She'd make school visits." "I really liked her summer reading programs."

### **Research required**

Clearly, if I was ever going to find out more about Mrs. Popp, I had to do some research. I started with our adult services supervisor, Pat Vorwald. Although Pat has only been in her current position at Freeport Library since 2008, she began her library career here right after her graduation from the University of Iowa. Maybe, during her earlier career at Freeport Library, before going on to be a hot-shot business librarian at Honeywell, she'd crossed paths with Mrs. Popp. "Sorry," Pat told me, "Mrs. Popp was before my time."

We have a couple of long-time library clerks who have worked here since the 1980s. Maybe they knew Mrs. Popp. They didn't. "She was before my time," they said. Okay, no first-person library accounts. On to the old scrapbooks and back issues of "The Journal-Standard."

## **They never called her Violet**

Her name was Violet Popp, but people knew her as Mrs. Popp. She worked at Freeport Library for 23 years, from 1949 until her retirement in 1972. Mrs. Popp was a lively, diminutive woman who managed to convey a great enthusiasm for reading and for children. She added color and cheer to the children's area of the library, which, it may be fair to say, was more than a tad dreary prior to her coming.

She was admired for her Saturday morning story times as well as for her summer reading programs. She visited school classrooms to drum up business for the summer programs (just like we do now). One summer program had "Walk in Space" as its theme.

Mrs. Popp's love for books began in childhood. She recalled, in a newspaper article announcing her pending retirement, how her mother would schedule family reading sessions outside on the lawn for her and her brother and sister. "Oliver Twist" and books by Louisa May Alcott were childhood favorites.

Mrs. Popp grew up on a farm in Lancaster Township without access to a library. Instead, her mother would travel to Freeport to sell dairy products and spend any extra money on carefully selected books, which would be passed from one family to another.

Mrs. Popp began her library career at Freeport's Henny Branch Library. She moved to the main library as its children's librarian in 1955. The children's department was in an east room on the second floor. As attendance soared under her tutelage, the department moved to the lower floor of the library in 1961. Mrs. Popp recalled how children "would come in the back door and gaze in amazement at the transformation and anxiously await the opening of the new department."

## **The love of reading**

Mrs. Popp believed parents and teachers need to encourage children to "take time out to read." She attributed her retirement in 1972 to her husband Frank's health. She expressed her continuing interest in the library and her hope "for the very best in library service to children and teens of Freeport."

"It is so great to help children really feel the love of reading and see what can be accomplished," she told a J-S reporter, "and this is a part of me I hope never dies." I'd say Mrs. Popp lives on in the affection all those Rotarians and Kiwanians and Lions expressed for her when I first spoke to them in 2004 about what today's library offers.

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