

FOREWORD

PUBLIC LIBRARY BEGINNINGS
IN SASKATCHEWAN

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The Regina Public Library owes its beginnings to the Mechanics' Institutes that began in Glasgow in 1823, followed by the London (England) Mechanics' Institute.¹ By 1828 the Montreal Mechanics' Institute had opened, followed by Toronto's and Kingston's in 1831.

These institutes could be joined for a small membership fee; evening lectures, lending libraries, and reading rooms allowed working-class people to learn technical and scientific principles underlying their trade, furthering self-education and enrichment. This concept inspired philanthropist Andrew Carnegie to generously fund public libraries around the world. Governments began to recognize the benefits of an educated society to the social and economic development of the country and used the model of mechanics' institutes in the establishment of early libraries through legislation and some funding. In 1895, London, Ontario, opened its first public library under the Free Libraries Act of 1882.²

In 1890 The Mechanics and Literary Institutes Ordinance was passed by the Government of the North-West Territories. This legislation enabled public support for libraries wherever thirty persons

in a town or village signed a declaration and paid the subscription fee of one dollar each. The purpose of an institute was “to encourage mechanics, manufactures and arts generally,

- a) By having evening classes organized for the imparting of practical instruction to its pupils;
- b) By establishing a library of books on one or more of the following subjects, viz.: Mechanics, Manufactures, Agriculture, Horticulture, Philosophy, Science, the Fine and Decorative Arts, History, Travels, Poetry, Biography and Fiction; and,
- c) Establishing a Reading Room.”³

Funding for these institutes came from membership fees and eventually from a provincial book grant up to fifty dollars annually.

In 1906 the newly created Government of Saskatchewan proclaimed An Act to Provide for the Establishment of Public Libraries: The Public Libraries Act. This act provided for the establishment of “a *free public library*” in a municipality, with an attached newsroom, on receipt of a petition signed by at least one-tenth of the electors. For a grant of more than \$500, council could establish an assessment and levy “not exceeding one mill in the dollar” to be called “The Free Library Rate” or raise additional funds by debentures, at the request of the board. This legislation inspired Regina residents to petition for a free public library.

The legislation allowed for a book grant from the provincial government that would match library expenditures on books, magazines, and newspapers, to a maximum of \$200 per year: this amount did not increase until 1954. The act stipulated the appointment, composition, and terms of office of a library board: the mayor, one council member, and six members appointed from among the residents of the municipality, each of whom would hold office for two years. These terms remain unchanged for over one hundred years.

The act included authority for the council to appoint the janitor as a special constable with “the special duty of preserving the peace

in the rooms of the library ... and of preventing stealing, injuring the property of the library or any breach of the peace therein and of apprehending offenders.”⁴

Some communities had access to reading material through the generosity of individuals who shared their book collections; local societies or businesses also established reading rooms that offered a selection of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines. Qu’Appelle had a reading room in 1888, and Grenfell formed a Mechanics’ and Literary Institute in 1892, taking advantage of the 1890 legislation.⁵ Many towns relied on books provided by travelling libraries, initiated by the Legislative Library in 1914, which had 125 libraries in circulation by 1917.⁶ Libraries established before World War I were “Carnduff, 1907; Regina, 1908; Francis MLI, 1910; Estevan and Sintaluta, 1911; Moose Jaw, Prince Albert and Wolseley, 1912; Saskatoon and Weyburn, 1913; Lanigan, 1914.”⁷

John Hawkes, appointed the first legislative librarian in 1907, played a fundamental role in guiding the development of early libraries and ensuring that settlers had access to good reading material. In 1922 he was also responsible for the creation of the Open Shelf library system, which allowed individuals from anywhere in the province to borrow from a collection housed in the Legislative Library.⁸

