

Toronto Public Library

The Swansea Memorial Branch



1919 - 1994

Swansea, a district of Toronto whose history dates back through centuries, occupies the ridge between High Park and the Humber River, south of Bloor Street West. Swansea was, until annexed to the city in 1967, a separate village of 601 acres, approximately one and a quarter miles square.

The Swansea Memorial Library came into existence in 1919 out of funds held by the Women's Patriotic League who wanted "a memorial to our Swansea men who have seen active service in the Great War." (Swansea had sent 172 men to fight in the First World War; 20 died overseas.) A Library Association was established and a Board of Directors of Swansea residents was elected. The first president was Mary Hutton Smith, a housewife who had settled in Swansea in 1892 with her husband, advertising executive Robert C. "Globe" Smith. Mr. J. A. Short, principal of Swansea Public School, was secretary, and the treasurer was Mabel Dancy, the wife of a Toronto contractor, Arthur H. Dancy. Other members of the first Board were Messrs. W. H. Hall (a manager), D. J. McBeth (a carpenter), James Wilson (a paper ruler), and A. B. Hutchinson (a bricklayer).

There was difficulty finding a suitable building, so the Library was located in Swansea Public School on Windermere Avenue. The opening had to be postponed due to an outbreak of smallpox and the subsequent closing of the school. Eventually, on November 30, 1919, Swansea Memorial Public Library was officially opened, with "a good programme of music and addresses suitable to occasion by local talent." W. O. Carson, Inspector of Public Libraries of Ontario, spoke on the value of reading.

The librarian, Joseph Orr (also caretaker of Swansea Public School), was paid a salary of \$12.50 per month; his duties included caretaking. The first book order was for 155 books at \$136.22, and 11 newspaper and magazine subscriptions at \$24.85. The library was open on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. and Saturdays from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m. At this time a minimum membership fee of \$1.00 per year was charged. New members were recruited through door to door canvassing. By the first annual meeting in January 1920 membership was up to seventy-one.

As a result of the Public Library Act of 1920, Swansea Memorial became a Free Library in 1923 under the control of the Rural School Board. Membership in the Library became free. When Swansea was incorporated as a village in 1926 there was another reorganization of the Library Board. The new board consisted of seven members: three appointed by Village Council and three appointed by the School Board, with the Village Reeve being an ex-officio member.

It should be noted that, at this time, library policy was that books by Canadian and British authors were preferred, and any purchase of books by foreign authors, including Americans, had to be approved by the entire Board.

One of these authors eventually approved was Adolf Hitler in 1938 for *Mein Kampf*. (The Board member who offered to secure the book for the library was Lucy Maud Montgomery Macdonald. The famed writer lived in Swansea from 1935 until her death in 1942, and was on the Library Board from 1938 to 1940.)

By 1930, it was decided that attendance at the library warranted its opening five evenings a week from October 1 to April 1. With increased hours, it was necessary in 1933 to hire an assistant to the librarian, at \$8 a month. The library was outgrowing its accommodation at Swansea Public School. In 1936 the collection included "about 5000 carefully selected volumes," housed in cupboards which lined the halls of the school. A long campaign was started in 1933 to persuade Village Council of the necessity for a library building. This matter was not resolved until 1959, when the library moved to its own room at 95 Lavinia Avenue. The library was in the newly-built Village Municipal Offices Building, designed by architect N. A. Armstrong and officially opened on 20 May 1959. Library hours continued to be limited though, being open 13.5 hours a week.

This same year, 1959, saw an arrangement made between Swansea and Toronto Public Library. Effective on or after November 2, there were to be reciprocal borrowing privileges without payment of a non-resident fee. Swansea Library was to build up its Boys' and Girls' collection which could serve both the Swansea and Runnymede areas; adult readers from Swansea could make free use of Runnymede Branch Library. Toronto was to provide children's books, the assistance of a Boys' and Girls' librarian, and advice on library organization, for which Swansea would pay \$1,200 a year. The arrangement was to be renewed annually on the mutual consent of the two Library Boards.

In 1967, the Village of Swansea Memorial Library Board ceased to exist and management of the library was taken over by the Toronto Public Library Board. (The old municipal building became the Swansea Community Centre.) Under TPL, library collections and services to Swansea gradually increased. In November 1973, for example, TPL's bookmobile, Library-on-Wheels, began to make stops at the Swansea Shopping Centre at Southport Road and the Queensway to serve the residents of south Swansea.

In the 1970s, TPL began to scrutinize its services to Swansea. Reports by the Library's Planning Department in 1976 and in 1986 both recommended that, in view of existing branches (Runnymede, Annette) and population densities and growth, the library in Swansea should be relocated farther south than 95 Lavinia. Heated discussions ensued between those in the community who wished the library to remain at 95 Lavinia, and those who wanted it moved. On April 13, 1991, Swansea Memorial Library was closed when the Swansea Town

Hall building was shut down for a \$1.5 million renovation and retrofit, and for the construction of an adjacent 68-unit single-and-seniors residence. On January 29, 1992, the TPL Board voted to form a 10-person committee of library, city and community representatives to examine library service alternatives for Swansea. At its October 28, 1992 meeting, the TPL Board decided to reopen Swansea Memorial Branch at 95 Lavinia Avenue in 1993 on a 28-hour-a-week basis for a trial period of one year. The decision followed an agreement between the TPL Board and the City of Toronto (formally made in February 1993) that the City would enter into a lease with the Board for approximately 1,100 square feet of space at 95 Lavinia for twelve months at a nominal sum of \$1.00; that the Swansea Town Hall Board of Management would pay for the operating costs of the space; and that the Library Board would evaluate the usage at the facility over the year and make a decision concerning the future of the branch.

Swansea Memorial Branch reopened on July 14, 1993, as a satellite of nearby Runnymede Branch. It is open on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and on Wednesdays, 1 to 8 p.m. The branch has a collection of about 9,000 volumes of adult books (popular bestsellers, paperbacks, large print, and books on tape), children's books (picture, board, easy reading paperbacks, and books on tape) as well as magazines and daily newspapers. Although its services are aimed mainly at children and seniors, Swansea customers have access to the entire collection of the Toronto Public Library system through the library's on-line catalogue.

Prepared by Swansea Memorial Library staff, 1984

Revised by Barbara Myrvold, Local History Coordinator, 1993

