

# HISTORY OF THE ORINDA LIBRARY

*This document was written by Betty Madison, President and Vice-President of the Orinda Library Board, Inc., 1953; Honorary Member, Orinda Library Board, Inc., 1967; Historian for the Orinda Library and the Friends of the Orinda Library.*

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The very first Library in Orinda was a small Deposit Station, located in the Orinda Park School. The Librarian was Mrs. Artie Barber. At that time Orinda was a summer community, so there were not many people in Orinda during the year. The circulation of books during the year 1914 to 1915 was 2,917. Already we were a reading community.

The year 1925 saw us in a larger location--the Orinda Store, built in 1924 but opened in January 1925. The owner was Mr. E. I. De Laveaga, who also owned Orinda Properties Company, which was located in back of the store. Now there were two shelves for books in a four by four bookcase. There was little supervision at this time, and the County was about to remove the Orinda Branch. A local woman, Nellie Dieterich, realized that there was a nearly vacant store which could provide Library space. She obtained the sponsorship of the P.T.A., whose women volunteered to work from two until five on Monday and Friday afternoons. This was not a tight arrangement, so that when Mrs. Dawson, a librarian, moved into Orinda she was asked to be responsible for the Library, which she did.

She received an enormous salary of ten dollars a month. Days were cold, so she accumulated her money for five months to buy wood and coal for the stove with which to keep warm. The store used for the Library charged no rental. Book circulation went up. Whenever the store was rented, the ladies would just look for another vacant store to keep the Library open. During the Depression, Mrs. Dawson's salary went down to seven dollars and fifty cents a month. A major change occurred in 1935, when Mrs. Dieterich asked the Orinda Improvement Association to speak to the Fire Commissioners about an addition being added to their station for a Library. Just a month later, the books of the Association showed that the State Unemployment Relief Administration approved the addition and alteration of the Fire House. Within a month, the addition was started under the supervision of two local architects, Mr. A.P. Stephenson and Mr. R. Sisson. The Library remained there until the Fire House was sold by the County in 1944.

For five years we were without a Library until the year 1949. The Orinda Community Church was being built. Virginia Phair was head of the Mother's Club at that time. Virginia knew there was an unfinished room below the Children's Unit at the Orinda Community Church. She persuaded the County Library to reopen in this space. She talked to the Orinda Lions Club, and they donated all the cost of lumber and the making of shelves in the rough area. A new Library became a reality. Of course water would seep into the right hand side of the Library in the wet winter time. The County staff referred to the 400 square foot Orinda Library as the "Project Obstacle Course". You really had to know how to get there to go to the Library. Park in the Church parking lot, turn left and go down the concrete steps into the room in which there was one table and four chairs.

When it was occupied, you couldn't go around to get the books you wanted. Naturally, dreams of a larger Library started to occur. In 1953 the Junior Women's Club formed in Orinda. What did we need--a project, of course. We surveyed the community and found that a public Library was most wanted. Remember these were the days of [one-car families and] carpools when one would have the car only once a week. With cooperative husbands, the women on Van Ripper Lane were the first members of the Junior Women's Club. We became charter members of the group. We came up with the idea of a new Library for Orinda. We thought it would be possible to do with other organizations to help us raise the money needed, realizing the nature of our population. We started talking around and we received a phone call from Dr. Lloyd Farrar saying that the Lions Club was also interested. Three members of the Lions Club would like to meet with three of our members of the Junior Women's Club at Ken Courtwright's home on April 1st, 1954.

Mrs. Bertha Hellum was working her first day as Head Librarian for Contra Costa County. The Junior Women's Club called her and invited her to join the meeting at Ken Courtwright's home. In her book, "History of Orinda," Muir Sorrick attributes the success of the Library building to the strong efforts of the Junior Women's Club and the Orinda Women's Club. Three Junior Women's Club members, June Estes, our first President, Betty Madison, and Elaine Wilford, met with Ken Courtwright, Dr. Farrar and George Hartzell that evening, along with Mrs. Hellum. She also thought our idea a good idea. Our goal would be to build a Library for present Orinda and also for the future Orinda. At that time, the County policy was that when there was a building, the County would supply personnel and in unincorporated areas also janitorial and ongoing material costs for the building. We didn't see how we could miss.

We formed the Orinda Board Library Committee, co-chaired by Lloyd Farrar and Betty Madison. Betty was also representative to the Civic Affairs Committee for the Junior Women's Club. This was under the pre-government organization of the Orinda Association to give input to them of members' feelings about community affairs. Naturally at their next meeting she informed the Civic Affairs group about plans for building a new Library. The Junior Women's Club didn't let any opportunity for publicity go by. We held rummage sales, fashion shows, and stuffed envelopes for the Orinda Association. The Lions did likewise. Each group contributed one hundred dollars for beginning expenses, so we were ready to go. The Junior Women's Club started the weekly story hour for young children at the Library. We also gave money for additional shelves put up by our husbands. In addition, we purchased more books for the Library. When summer came, Mrs. Dawson started the "Bookworm Club" to encourage children to read more. Getting more publicity, we put a copy of the certificate and the pin awarded [by whom?] in our local bank window. We were out to get all the publicity possible. We continued our work on the project, and in 1954 we were able to get a local architect, Joe Smoot, to design a building for us. Mrs. Hellum told us that we should plan for a population around 11,000 in 1960 and 17,000 in 1970, and therefore we should plan a Library building of about 3,000 ft. for the first part with plans made for taking it up to 8,000 for the children's room and meeting room for the community.

We began to realize about this time that it was important for us to incorporate. Mrs. Ernest Spiegel, wife of our future attorney for the Orinda Library Board, Inc., offered to draw up the

necessary papers for us. The Orinda Library Board, Inc. was incorporated. You can imagine how much better our husbands felt about what we were undertaking. At this time we only had room for 3,800 books in our small Library, so you can see we were a population with a problem we were trying to solve. We really only planned to build the first part of our Library, thinking that in time there would be some sort of a district which could add the addition. At that time we appointed Rudy Rassmussen as our fund chairman, and letters with our plan were sent to all Orinda organizations. The Orinda Association assured the Orinda Library Board Inc. that there would be a site for us on Community property. Where this would be was not known. This was the time when there was a Master Plan being drawn of Orinda. The location of the Community Center wasn't even known.

By this time in 1954, we had an increase in hours in our small room which became too much for Mrs. Dawson to handle so regrettably she had to retire in 1954. We were very sorry to see her go after so many years of being Librarian in Orinda. Orinda was growing and a new underpass was built. The Rotary Club decided to sponsor a "Fiesta" for the entire community in 1955. Their idea was to raise a large sum of money and spend it on a community project. Naturally we thought the Library would be a good idea. The Fiesta raised all of \$6,200. In December the Rotary decided to give the Orinda Library Board, Inc. this money to be used for the future meeting room which would be called the "Fiesta Room". With a lot of work, we now had a resolution from the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors to support the building of a new Library. Once again the idea to take over an empty store was suggested. This didn't sit well with our Library Board. Betty Madison took this idea to the Civic Affairs Committee of the Orinda Association, and grateful thanks go to Jim Hupp who was head of the Orinda Association Planning Committee, as the Committee decided this was not the right idea. There would be a better place in Orinda for a new Library.

By the year 1956, it seemed about the right time to start raising money to build the building so the Orinda Library Board, Inc. appointed an "Advisory Committee" of leading Orinda citizens. We knew by this time that we would be located at the southeast corner of Irwin Way and the Orinda Highway [now Orinda Way]. Remember Orinda was still small and not incorporated. The first thing the Orinda Library Board, Inc. did was to put up a sign showing the community the site for our new Library. We had a terrible time putting up the sign. It was done by Lloyd Farrar, Ken Courtwright, Betty Madison, and Marge Scarich who was the new member from the Junior Women's Club. Our terrible time putting up the sign was due to mud, mud, mud. We immediately called in engineers to look at the situation and they assured us that it could be handled. We continued with our publicity campaign as our circulation for 1955-1956 was 60,912 books. In May of 1956 the Orinda Library Board, Inc. put out a proposal statement to the community. We now had a proposal from the Orinda Association that we could lease the land on the southeast corner of Irwin Way and Orinda Highway. The Contra Costa Board of Supervisors had agreed we could lease this land for 99 years for one dollar a year.

By this time we were thinking about raising \$125,000 for the first part of the building. We pledged that every cent raised would go for this building. Expenses at this time were covered by

cash: the Orinda Woman's Club donating \$5,000 and the Lions also donating; grants and business and fraternal organization donations. It was time for us to start looking for a fund chairman. We appointed a small group of men to undertake this task. It took time to find the right chairman, but we kept on. Bill Fleager was on our Orinda Library Board, Inc. at this time and we asked him to be on the newly formed Advisory Committee. We were aware that Bill was friends with Perc Brown, who had raised money for a number of Libraries. When contacted by Bill, he agreed to be our Fund Chairman. Things all began to come in place now. Perc Brown headed our Fund Raising Group and obtained an office at 118 Orinda Highway and a P.O. box, plus two telephone numbers to use. He began naming his key people such as Bruce Howard who became chairman for "Special Gifts" and sent out mail. Walter Boysen on this committee also appointed captains to help. School Superintendent Joe Scheaff wrote to all boys and girls in the Orinda school district. Margee Scarich of the Orinda Woman's Club agreed to be in charge of all pledges, which would be solicited for and paid as \$72 over a three-year period of time.

By this time we had more than 26 endorsing organizations such as Improvement Associations, churches, clubs and the Chamber of Commerce plus the Orinda Association. All of our activity spurred other groups to also ask about community land. At the same time our Library hours were increased again, 10:00 to 9:00 Monday through Friday and 10:00 to 12:00 on Saturday. Perc Brown continued adding men to his committee. Odie Monahan agreed to be Fund Raising Consultant; Bill Fleager administration; George Hauerekan the Library building; Marvin Baker and Howard Libby the Audit committee; Walter Friebeerg agreed to collect from the Village businesses and Robert Gemetti the Crossroads businesses. Verla Krotz, head of the Republican women and of the State Board of Education, agreed to be in charge of door to door solicitation which required help of the Junior Women's Club. We started the drive June 9, 1956 with 400 block captains. By June 22nd we had \$40,000 in pledges of \$72 over a three-year period. In August and September the drive continued. By this time Orindans were checking out more books than any other place in our county. The committee under George Hauerekan selected Aiken and Collins as our new architects. They planned the first part of our new Library, and also the next part of the children's room and the community meeting room. We even had a Brownie Troop give \$8.50 toward the Library. Everyone was interested.

By November 1957, we had a preliminary sketch, and the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors approved a land use permit. By February 1958 we had \$96,000 available, and by March we had \$100,000 available. Perc Brown contributed the remaining \$25,000 needed to complete our building. A name plaque was placed on the front of our new Library to honor Perc Brown.

After four years of intensive work, the Orinda Library Board, Inc. had succeeded in building a new \$125,000 Library in Orinda. We had a book circulation of 94,700 per year at this time. After the building of the Library, Dr. Lloyd Farrar resigned from the Board, as well as Verla Krotz, and the Orinda Library Board, Inc. voted to establish Honorary Memberships. The first two were given to these individuals. As the Orinda Garden Club had volunteered to do the landscaping for the Orinda Library, we also gave them an Honorary Membership. The fourth Honorary Membership

was given to Betty Madison in October 26, 1967, when she resigned from the Orinda Library Board, Inc.

The flag for our building was donated by the local D.A.R. The land was deeded to us the night before we opened by the Orinda Association. The night before we were to open, Perc Brown gave an elaborate dinner for the Orinda Library Board, Inc., and all committee people, to say "Thank you" for all the work we did. Invitations were sent out and we opened.

We dedicated the building on November 14th, 1958 with 400 people in attendance. The main speaker at our dedication was James Hart from U.C. Berkeley. We became the fifth Library in the County to have a new photographic book charging system. At this time Mrs. Sarah Melanowsky was our head Librarian. The Orinda Library Board, Inc. continued during this time, and in 1959 we asked Muir Sorrick to join us. We were in need for someone to start a "Friends" group for the Library and knew that she was the right person to do this. The goal of a Friends group was to foster good relations between the Library and the community. The Book Fair was started, and four public meetings a year were held, one of which was a night meeting to elect the new Orinda Library Board, Inc.

In 1965, the Library Services District was formed, which enabled us to build the addition to the Library. Local Attorney Howard Bell was Chairman for this group. This part of the building opened in 1971. The only negative in this part was that the lease had to be changed, so that in 1998 the County could buy the building and the land for only \$1.00. The County would not sign the lease without this clause.

The Orinda Library Board, Inc. felt there was no longer any reason for them to exist. They decided to turn the lease over to the Friends of the Orinda Library at this time. Howard Bell continued to be the attorney for the Friends until the present [until about 1997]. Muir Sorrick continued with the growing Friends group, which met at various members' houses in the beginning. They started with a small book fair. Their goal was to foster good relationships between the community and the Library, which is still a goal of our Friends of the Orinda Library today. Today the Friends of the Orinda Library has thousands of members and still retains the same goals. The Board of the present Friends group meets on the third Wednesday of the month in the Meeting Room at the Library, and holds four public meetings a year. One is a night meeting which elects the incoming Board, plus there are special meetings for members, as interesting speakers are available. The present Board also continues to contribute money to our present Library in far larger sums, and also provides half of the money with the city to keep the Library open 40 hours a week.

Other than an early Library in Martinez, we were the only Library at that time to be built with privately donated funds in Contra Costa County. All other Libraries in the County have been built using Library Service Funds. One day, going through our Friends of the Orinda Library files, Gigi Halloran happened to find the new lease, and in reading it found a very disturbing clause. She brought it back to our Friends of the Orinda Library Board and we formed our first committee which she chaired. We made it a small committee in order to move quickly. On it we

had an engineer, Ed Chappell, to whom Betty Madison, a committee member, related the story of the mud they had encountered when putting up the Library sign.

When Gigi went back to work, Betty chaired the Committee. We became very frustrated as the County wouldn't even talk to us about the lease. However, the Board members kept the lease idea in mind continually. When our City of Orinda incorporated, we realized we had a hope. It was not the right time to approach them however, so we waited. When we started having County Library Commissioners, Friends of the Orinda Library board member Amy Worth was appointed our representative. Being on the Friends of the Orinda Library Board we were very aware of what was happening in the County. When hours were cut and we had to ask the City for help to keep open 40 hours, we asked Amy to go to the City and see if they would be willing to take over the Library. Tom Sinclair, our City Manager, expressed interest but it really took two years before this was accomplished in July of 1995. Now the City of Orinda is responsible for the maintenance of the Library

The Friends of the Orinda Library continue to be grateful to Muir Sorrick for donating all the proceeds of her third printing of the History of Orinda to continue to go to the Friends of the Orinda Library.