

Belmont Library is 90

Saturday open house kicks off anniversary celebration

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — Voters agreed in 1927 to accept an offer from George and Walter Duffy to donate the cost of building a new library for the town, and the new facility was dedicated the following year, on Feb. 4, 1928.

This Saturday, Feb. 3, the Belmont Public Library will celebrate that achievement and mark its 90th anniversary with an open house from 1 to 3 p.m.

Library Director Eileen Gilbert said photographs and historical documents will be on display, and the library is hoping residents will bring their own mementoes of the library to share.

Many of the more recent photographs have been digitized, along with some old photos from the early days, but Gilbert said they have little from the middle of the century, and she is encouraging people to dig out their scrapbooks and share what they have as the celebration continues throughout the year.

The Belmont Public Library was established in 1893, but it operated in shared quarters with the selectmen in a hose house serving the nearby mill. The selectmen and the library were located on the second floor of the hose house.

The Duffys thought the library should have a proper building, and with town meeting approval, the hose house was demolished to make room for the new building, designed by Wells and Hudson, renowned Boston architects. Built in the colonial revival style, the brick library had elaborate wooden decor on the inside — features that led to the building being listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

Throughout this year, the library will be celebrating its 125 years of existence as well as the 90-year history of the current building.

Gilbert, who came to the Belmont Public Library three years ago this March, has been researching some of the library's history, and said the first librarian to work in the new building was Etta Dearborn. A document from the 1960s showed that the librarian's salary was increased to \$1.60 per hour, with the library open 20 hours a week at that time. It did not open full-time until the 1990s, and Gilbert believes Jackie Gardner was the first full-time librarian.

Through the years, the building saw very few changes, and those that did occur had to do with such things as the lighting.

She said that, well into the 1990s, the basement of the library was used for planning board meetings. It eventually was converted into a children's reading area.

The Duffys would be surprised to see how the use of the library has changed, especially since the advent of computers.

"The Duffys would be quite baffled by the internet," Gilbert said.

For today's patrons, however, the ability to use public computers and downloadable books is taken for granted. Inter-library loans also continue to be important, she said, because "we can't own or store all those books in our building."

Another way the library is adapting is to create partnerships with the schools and senior center. There are children's story times, and library assistant Sarah Frost works with Belmont Parks and Recreation to offer book-related programs. During the warmer months, children take books from the library to the Belmont

Senior Center, where they read to their elders or the seniors read to the students. The library also has a book group for seniors.

"We're looking to do more things like that," said Gilbert.

As it embraces the new, the library also holds onto its past. It still uses much of the original furniture, and through a grant from the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program, it has commissioned a study on what to do to keep the building in perfect working order. That report is due in June.

As part of its 90th anniversary celebration, the library will also have special programs, such as one by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance on how to preserve your home. The library will sponsor a jazz concert, in keeping with its 1920s beginnings, at the Belmont Bandstand in July.

As for the sharing of memories, Gilbert encourages people to write them down, send in pictures, and provide newspaper clippings that can be compiled as part of the library's history.

Saturday's display during the open house will include old town reports, an original 1928 catalogue, a photocopy of the building dedication, some of the older pictures, and the original bookplate that was used until a couple of years ago. It will also include a copper engraving of the library used for printing.

For further information, contact Gilbert at the library, 603-267-8331 or bpl@belmontnh.org (<mailto:bpl@belmontnh.org>).



The Belmont Public Library is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. (Tom Caldwell/Laconia Daily Sun)



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Belmont Public Library Director Eileen Gilbert is planning a celebration of the library's 90th anniversary, with an open house this weekend. (Tom Caldwell/Laconia Daily Sun)



The Belmont Public Library features elaborate woodwork and other features in the colonial revival style that helped get it on the National Register of Historic Places. (Tom Caldwell/Laconia Daily Sun)



A historical photo shows the interior of the Belmont Public Library, looking east, from its early days. The library is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. (Courtesy Photo)



A vintage photo of the interior of the Belmont Public Library, which is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. (Courtesy Photo)

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