

News Release

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For immediate release

For information contact: Jennifer Windecker, 250-729-2327

Vancouver Island Regional Library celebrates 75 years of service

From humble beginnings with 12,600 books, six branches and seven van routes in the central Island region to a system with more than 1.1 million items and 38 branches – that’s the story of Vancouver Island Regional Library, which celebrates 75 years of service this month.

Its history is inextricably linked to a grant from the Andrew Carnegie Corporation of New York to start a small system that has grown into the fourth largest library system in British Columbia – the 13th largest in Canada - serving Vancouver Island from north of Victoria to Haida Gwaii and Bella Coola on the central mainland coast.

While Victoria and Vancouver had enjoyed municipal libraries since the late 1800s, only 30 percent of BC’s urban population had access to a library; only five percent in rural areas.

During the early 1930s, a \$100,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation started a regional library system in the Fraser Valley - the first of its kind in the world.

The library was popular with residents, and a decision was made to try similar systems in the Okanagan and Vancouver Island regions. Carnegie provided \$15,000 - Vancouver Island only received \$6,500 of this start-up grant.

Voters had to determine in a plebiscite to approve a library tax to provide the best books, for the most people, at the least cost. It took two plebiscites before Vancouver Island Union Library was born, in 1936. Headquarters were in a basement on the corner of Wallace and Fraser Streets in Nanaimo. Later, the name was changed to Vancouver Island Regional Library.

The first library board envisioned a system that would grow as more municipalities and school districts joined. Sadly, this was not the case as it was the Depression, followed by the war years when van deliveries occurred ONLY once every eight weeks due to gas and tires shortages.

Times have changed, and people frequently wonder about the future of libraries. Their underlying comments are: “eBooks are huge; the Internet is where people find information.

Strong Libraries ■ Strong Communities

Bella Coola Bowser Campbell River Chemainus Comox Cortes Island Courtenay Cowichan Cowichan Lake Cumberland
Gabriola Island Gold River Hornby Island Ladysmith Masset Nanaimo Harbourfront Nanaimo Wellington Parksville
Port Alberni Port Alice Port Clements Port Hardy Port McNeill Port Renfrew Quadra Island Qualicum Beach Queen Charlotte
Sandspit Sayward Sidney/North Saanich Sointula Sooke South Cowichan Tahsis Tofino Ucluelet Union Bay Woss

Why do we need libraries?" says Rosemary Bonanno, executive director, Vancouver Island Regional Library.

"The answer comes in three parts: Libraries embrace the digital age. Libraries bring technology to everyone. Traditional library materials, services and programs are alive and well," she says.

Technology has certainly changed the library. The quiet buildings once devoted solely to reading and research and supervised by librarians who shushed patrons into compliant silence now are busy gathering places and community hubs that provide everyone equal access to computers, technology, and other online resources.

It's not just the so-called intellectuals who grasp and understand the powerful role of libraries.

"When you are growing up, there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully," says Keith Richards, guitarist for the Rolling Stones, in his recent memoir *Life*. "The church, which belongs to God, and the public library, which belongs to you. The public library is a great equalizer."

At Vancouver Island Regional Library you can borrow Richards' memoir in three forms: book, audiobook on CD, or downloadable to your computer, e-reader or MP3 player.

For more information on VIRL's history and when branches were established, please visit the website: www.virl.bc.ca (Spotlight on ...).

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