Orange Beach Library History

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Growths, Strengths & Endurances
A Historical Review of the Orange Beach Public Library

Excerpt from Master’s Project
University of Southern Mississippi
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STAGES OF THE ORANGE BEACH PUBIC LIBRARY

In 1992, the City of Orange Beach took their first step in the development of the Orange Beach Public Library. An Ordinance on February 3, 1992 created the library board. On February 19, 1992, the Orange Beach Public Library Board of Trustees first met. Notes in the minutes discussed allocation of $40,000 from the city for establishing a library. It was also determined that the library would be housed in the south wing of the Municipal Complex. Handbooks of standards and policies were distributed to the new board members.

By the second meeting in March, two names were being mentioned for the position of librarian even though a position had not been advertised or even written. At the Board Meeting on 4/4/1992, a job description was sent for approval by the city then posted through the University of Alabama Placement Services.

First Library Director and the Grand Opening

Three applicants were interviewed by the library board. After the third interview it was agreed that two of the interviewed applicants did not meet the advertised requirements. On June 8th by a unanimous vote the board decided to recommend to the Mayor that Ms. Marsha Owens be offered the position of Orange Beach Public Library’s first librarian. On June 22nd Ms. Marsha Owens was present for the board meeting as the librarian. Owens started the library from the ground up. She began the collection from donations and a room in the City Hall, which would soon serve as the city’s first library.

By December 10, 1992, Ms. Owens had developed an operating library with a collection of 2,046 Progress Report, and an automated system. The Library opened to the public with 41 registered users.

Old Post Office to Library

Growth and use of the library continued. Space became a premium. Another staff member, Patti Underwood, was hired to help with the growing numbers of users. With the continuing growth, it became evident to Owens and the board that additional space was required. In the January 26, 1993, board minutes, the discussion between the City and the library board about construction of a new facility were noted. By the end of the year, plans had not moved beyond the needs of the future library. Owens and the board looked to building a library but after months of dead ends, it was realized that the U.S Post office would be vacating its building for a new larger facility.

In 1994, the board revealed that the old post office had been discussed by city with interest in acquiring that building for the library. In 1994, the city did acquire the post office. A formal letter from Mayor Ellis stated that the old post office had been designated for the home of the new library. The purchase was followed with a period of planning and waiting. Two concerns faced the library board: the completion date of the new library, and the timeline for the renovation of the building after the city took possession. Owens and the board were excited about expanding the library.

November 1995 the library moved into the new location, a 3,500 sq. ft. building which provided a little space for growth.(This would be the Orange Beach Library’s home for six years.) Owens and the board had overcome many obstacles during the library’s short life. The continuing growth of the Orange Beach Public Library would continue to present challenges for the library board and the city council.

It was noted that although the library had a new larger home it could not support the growth they were experiencing. In the board minutes dated November 7, 1995 flier titled “Building for the Future” was shared. In January 1996 the library board minutes and progress report established and approved building fund for the Friends of the Library. A long process was initiated to plant the seed for future growth. After informing the city of their needs, a building fund was begun by the Friends of the Library. In addition to their book and bake sales the Friends of the Library decided to sell bricks which would be laid on the back patio of the new building.

Finding and acquiring a suitable location became the primary focus of the new library plans. After months of searching, the city acquired a piece of property that overlooks Wolf Bay. With the acquisition of the property, attention turned to selecting a design and architect for the library. The City joined Owens and the library board in the design and architect search. Eventually a design and architect were agreed upon and after numerous changes; the plans for the new library were finalized. The groundbreaking ceremony took place June 1999.

On April 8, 1999, Alabama Public Library System awarded the Orange Beach Public Library the blue ribbon for superior Library Standards. This was the first blue ribbon given in the State of Alabama. Hiring additional staff was a task Owens handled before the move. Staffing included additional full time reference/computer, circulation, and children’s staff personnel. The library was closed two weeks in order to make the move.

A New Library 2001

In 2001, the Orange Beach Public Library made a move to the newly constructed library that contained 10,500 sq ft of space. The library offered a separate children’s room, a reference/computer lab, an audiovisual room and a reading room. Unlike the old post office, the new building provided space for future growth.

In 2001, the Orange Beach Public Library faced an historic change. The founding library director, Ms. Marsha Owens, decided that she would retire. In January 9, 2002, Owens submitted her notice of resignation. After accepting Owens’ notice of resignation, the library board initiated a search for a new director.

In May 2002, the board hired a former Orange Beach Librarian, Bonnie Lee as the second director. Immediately prior to being named Director of the Orange Beach Public Library, Lee served as the director of the Baldwin County Library Cooperative, having served in that capacity for two years. Lee came on board as director on September 2002 and as of March 19, 2006, continues to serve. Under Lee’s direction, the library has continued to expand. Encountering Hurricane Ivan In preparation for hurricanes, the Orange Beach Public Library follows the “Hurricane Preparation Manual” which instructs that shelves be covered in plastic, exterior items secured, windows boarded, and materials near windows moved to a more secure location. Prior to landfall of Hurricane Ivan (2004), the staff members (including one staff member’s daughter) who were available came in to secure the building in accordance with the Hurricane Preparation Manual. Most of the computers were encased in plastic and stored in areas without large windows. Several were evacuated with staff members.

On September 16, 2004, 2:00am, Orange Beach and neighboring community Gulf Shores received a direct hit from Hurricane Ivan. Ivan made landfall as a category 3 (on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being strongest). Winds of 130 miles per hour were sustained.

The City of Orange Beach was severely damaged. The Beach Highway (181) was breached between the City of Orange Beach and the City of Gulf Shores, as was the beach road between Orange Beach and Perdido Key, Florida, which borders the city to the east. Canal Road, which parallels the Intra-Coastal Waterway to the south, provided the only vehicular access to the City of Orange Beach.

The Orange Beach Public Library received major roof damage from falling trees. No fewer than twelve taproot pines hit the roof with such force that a wall inside the building was not plumb. Light fixtures and ceiling tiles were knocked to the floor. A few punctures to the metal roof allowed for leaks in a few areas of the building. Remarkably, since the library is located on the banks of a large bay, no flooding was reported in the building nor was there a loss of windows.

Because of evacuation orders, the library was closed on September 14th. The staff was able to return on September 27th and began the clean up of the building’s interior and exterior. The library reopened in a makeshift manner, in the library’s meeting room, with very limited access, on October 4, 2004.

The make shift library consisted of four computers with Internet access, a small collection of books, 4 chairs and 2 tables for wireless users, and a couch and a couple of chairs for waiting. Because of the close quarters, only one staff member could be housed in the meeting room. This staff member answered questions while the other staff members provided assistance by bringing requested items from the library stacks.

This set up was utilized until mid-January when the library building was closed and the make shift library was relocated to the Adult Activity Center next door. The game room in the Adult Activity Center became the temporary library. The pool table became the computer table, two circulation stations were provided, and a small collection moved from the library.

Two staff members were housed in the game room/library to serve patrons one-on-one. The other staff members were relocated to a trailer that was parked in front of the Adult Activity Center. Daily operations continued as the staff attempted to bring a bit of normality to the library’s services. For example, if a patron requested items, the trailer-housed staff borrowed the requested items from another library.

By June 2005, the library roof had been repaired. After 10 months of limited service to the community, the library staff was anxious to move back into the library. Using a couple of dollies and the staff’s rolling chairs; the staff moved computers, collections, and fixtures across the parking lot. The library didn’t close a day for either of the moves. Full operating hours were maintained during the transitional period.

The threat of hurricanes continued for the library during the 2005 season, forcing evacuation for Hurricanes Dennis and Katrina, respectively. While affected by Hurricane Katrina, the Orange Beach Library provided relief for the evacuees of Katrina from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Evacuees spent tireless hours on-line attempting to find what was left of their homes. During the long searches, the library staff provided snacks for the adult evacuees and crafts for the children.

The Orange Beach Public Library is a technologically-advanced library, providing in 2003, for example, the first wireless library in the State of Alabama. The wireless service is provided 24 hours a day and is accessible from the parking lot, inside the building and on the back patio during operating hours and from the parking lot during non-operating hours. It is commonplace to find numerous cars in the parking lot at night, with the blue glow from computers the only indication of car occupancy. Progress and growth continue to characterize the history of the Orange Beach Public Library.

Today the library continues to grow; in 2007 the library had to add additional shelving units to help meet the needs of the growing community. The library employs ten staff members, one being part time, and four employees possess a Master’s in Library Science. Orange Beach continues to acknowledge the continuing changing needs of our community and patrons. A copy with footnotes and bibliography is available for viewing.