History of the Berwyn Public Library

by Eileen Pech
Dedicated to the professional staff
and volunteer trustees of the
Berwyn Public Library

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Introduction

Before Berwyn

Before there was a City of Berwyn, there was a Berwyn Library. By the time Berwyn residents voted in 1901 to separate from the Township of Cicero and become a township in their own right, the Berwyn Lending Library was already seven years old.

The present site of the Berwyn Public Library, 2701 S. Harlem Avenue, is part of a tract of land that once comprised the Ritzma family farm and extended from Cermak Road to Ogden Avenue and Harlem Avenue in Berwyn to Pulaski Road in Chicago. (Photo courtesy of Warren Ritzma)
Private Lending Library

“Berwyn was still very young when a group of early residents decided the little community needed a library,” noted the Berwyn Beacon newspaper in a recap of the institution’s early history.

The year was 1894, and Berwyn was a village of scattered houses, street corner gas lamps, and wooden sidewalks that after a heavy rain were liable to move over a few feet because the walks rested on stilts.

That spring, a handful of Berwyn’s leading ladies gathered in the home of Dr. Arthur MacNeal, founder of MacNeal Hospital. Determined to create a “book shelter” for their city, they elected as their president Mrs. Charles (Carrie Gregory) Piper,* the wife of Berwyn’s co-founder Charles E. Piper and the first president of the Berwyn Woman’s Club. Mrs. M. M. Hitchcock was elected secretary and Mrs. William R. Porter, treasurer. The women sponsored “entertainments” to raise money to buy books and began lending them out from the Piper family home at 3427 Oak Park Avenue.

The little library soon became so popular that the women persuaded Mr. Francis M. Lackey to provide room for a small rental library in his dry goods store on the southwest corner of Windsor Avenue and Elliott Avenue (now known as Grove Avenue).

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Because of changes over the years in the style of addressing women, this history will use a woman’s first name wherever possible. However, direct quotes from period documents will use the style of that time with the first name in parentheses.
Within a few years, interest grew to the point where Mr. Lackey no longer could afford the space to house the books or the time to check them in and out of circulation. The women asked permission from the District 100 Board of Education to turn the books over to Emerson School.

In the home of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur MacNeal, the leading ladies of Berwyn organize the city’s first book shelter in 1894. The house was later demolished and the site at 33rd Street and Oak Park Avenue in now occupied by the hospital that bears Dr. MacNeal’s name. (Photo courtesy of MacNeal Hospital)

The home of Berwyn co-founder Charles E. Piper, 3427 Oak Park Avenue, is the site from which books initially were distributed by the city’s first private lending library circa 1894. (Photo courtesy of Mayor Thomas Shaughnessy)

Charles E. Piper, co-founder of Berwyn, and his wife, Carrie Gregory Piper, co-founder of Berwyn’s first privately operated book shelter. (Photos courtesy of the Berwyn Beacon, now a copyright of the Berwyn Historical Society)
### 1890s Bestsellers

- Last of the Mohicans • James Fennimore Cooper  
- Lorna Doone • R. D. Blackmore  
- House of Seven Gables • Nathaniel Hawthorne  
- Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush • Ian Maclaren

### 1900s Bestsellers

- To Have and to Hold • Mary Johnston  
- The Pit: A Story of Chicago • Frank Norris  
- Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm • Kate Douglas Evans  
- House of Mirth • Edith Wharton  
- The Jungle • Upton Sinclair

### 1910s Bestsellers

- Their Yesterdays • Harold Bell Wright  
- Seventeen • Booth Tarkington  
- Mr. Britling Sees It Through • H. G. Wells  
- The U. P. Trail • Zane Grey  
- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse • Ibanez V. Blasco

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Check succeeding decades for top-selling books according to Wikipedia’s Publisher’s Weekly list.*
The desire for a Berwyn library refused to die, and in 1921, a time when the city was growing rapidly, the Berwyn Woman’s Club raised $100 to start a library for children.

Approximately one year later, in the Community Club House cloakroom in the south wing of the Masonic Temple at 3112 Oak Park Avenue, Miss Frances Fox began offering twice-weekly “quiet afternoons” for children.

This activity soon expanded into an entire reading room for children filled with donated books. Then, since the children wanted to take their treasured discoveries home, a card system was devised to allow them to do so, with the exception of “some very choice books” donated by Mrs. MacNeal that were not allowed to leave the premises.

“Miss Fox and the Woman’s Club were amazed at the interest shown in their library,” the Berwyn Beacon noted. Mrs. Lester (Gladys) B. Orr, a club member and former South Milwaukee librarian, volunteered to manage what now became known as the Berwyn Community Service Library. A committee of 10 Berwyn Woman’s Club members, chaired by Mrs. O. J. (Hattie) Deschauer, assisted Mrs. Orr in maintaining records and keeping the library open for the children three days a week from 3 to 5 P.M.

“Children even from the far north side of the city discovered the library and came regularly,” the Woman’s Club members reported. “Often there were 75 or 80 children in one afternoon.”

Gradually, adults also became aware of the little lending library for children and the Woman’s Club donated additional funds to buy current adult fiction for a rental library. By charging 2¢ per day for the rental books, club members obtained a steady source of
revenue for a project that at its peak offered more than 1,000 books for adults as well as children.

Sources differ as to the steps taken to create the Berwyn Public Library.

Berwyn Woman’s Club documents reflect that in 1924 the club asked the Berwyn Improvement Association to sponsor a meeting to “discuss the need for a tax-supported public library.” They note that it was under the leadership of Mrs. Chipman (Anna) Skeels, the Woman’s Club president, that Berwyn community organizations united in a petition drive to convince the mayor and Berwyn City Council to create a public library and to authorize a tax levy to support it.

Karel Marsicek, a member of the first governing board of the Berwyn Public Library, remembered events a bit differently and suggested the importance of his own involvement in an interview printed in the March 15, 1953, issue of the Berwyn Life:

Marsicek recalls that the movement for a Berwyn public library started in the winter of 1922–1923 by the Berwyn Improvement Association of which he was secretary. He said he had “a terrific urge to further his reading habits, but there was no public facility for borrowing books.”

At his suggestion, Marsicek said, the association directed him to write to the city council asking that something be done . . . and also to acquire park sites before the then rapidly developing community would be built up and the cost would be prohibitive.

When the late Mayor Fred H. Rudderham . . . advised the association to circulate petitions for the library and park project, the answer was the circulation of such petitions not only by the association but also by the Berwyn Woman’s Club and the South Berwyn Improvement Club calling for a referendum.

Memories may differ as to who originated the call for a public library, but there is no doubt about the Woman’s Club’s continued commitment to the library. Over succeeding decades the organization supported the library with monetary donations, sponsored numerous open houses, and planted trees at several library locations.

Nor was there any doubt about the library referendum. Placed on the ballot in 1923, it was approved by a margin of two-to-one.
The enabling ordinance, passed on November 18, 1924, established what was then called the “Public Library and Reading Room” and empowered the mayor with the approval of the City Council to appoint a nine-member Board of Library Directors.

That first Board, appointed on the night of Mayor Frank Janda’s second inauguration into office, included Marsicek and three Woman’s Club members—Mrs. Skeels, who was elected vice president, plus Mrs. Orr and Mrs. Deschauer. Mr. Frederick L. Dole was elected as the Board’s first president. Other members of that historic body included Mrs. Mae Lafferty, Messrs. John F. Lanka, James Pavek, and Dr. L. Stolfa.

The Board held its first meeting on May 7, 1925, and by November, it had obtained an anticipatory loan of $500 from the city to cover initial library expenses. Those expenditures included hiring a “library attendant” at a salary not to exceed $8 per week and $175 to cover seven months’ rent in the Berwyn Club, an L-shaped building at 33rd Street and Oak Park Avenue that had been constructed to house Masonic and Odd Fellows lodges as well as the men’s social club that gave the building its name.

Marsicek, in that 1953 Berwyn Life interview recalled 1925 as a year of “missed opportunity.” Following an appeal by the Library Board to obtain library sites, Marsicek said the city council formed a playground and recreation commission instead “and stymied the library board’s attempt to obtain a site or sites of its own.”

Nevertheless, the new library flourished, and by mid-1926 had amassed a collection of 4,000 volumes. The Board decided it was time to hire a full-time librarian. Among the applicants was Miss Margaret Ely, superintendent of book selection for the entire branch system of the Chicago Public Library. A native of Morrison, Illinois, Ely had received a Bachelor’s degree from Oberlin College in Ohio, and a library school diploma from the University of Wisconsin. She previously had served as director of the Tulsa High School Library in Oklahoma; as a scientific translator for patent attorneys; and as library instructor at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska.
The reference book *American Women* listed her as “a distinguished leader in her field.” Describing Miss Ely’s work in the Chicago Public Library system, Sister Mary Serena, professor of library science at Rosary College, River Forest, wrote, “When Miss Ely did not okay a book, there was great doubt concerning its worth; when she selected a book, other librarians were guided by her choice.”

**Ely Era Begins**

Duly impressed, the Board in June 1926 hired Miss Ely as Berwyn’s first full-time librarian, a position she would hold for 31 years. Progress came quickly after that.

One month after Ely’s arrival, the new facility had a name—the Berwyn Public Library. One more month, and borrowers’ cards were instituted. By October, an assistant was needed and Miss Mary Duran was hired as library typist for $60 per month.

The library’s first rental arrangement proved impermanent indeed. In November 1926, the building housing the library was sold to a motion picture company and the Board received notice to vacate by the end of the month.

A slumping real estate market led Barnhart & Co. Real Estate Office to offer its building at 2214–16 Oak Park Avenue to house the library. Rent was established at $60 per month for the first six months and $75 thereafter.

In anticipation of expanded services, the Library Board secured two tables and 12 chairs to furnish its new quarters and hired additional personnel. Mr. George Blaha was employed as janitor at a salary of $1 per day; Miss Mary Deschauer was hired at 25¢ per hour as part-time clerical assistant during the hours of 3 to 5 P.M. daily and 1 to 5 P.M. on Saturday. Mr. Glenn Roberts was employed as a page at 50¢ per day.

Opinions of the library’s new quarters varied. The *Berwyn Beacon* described it as “a tiny shack where the library, under trying physical conditions, carried on the business of a [facility] six times its size.”
Other newspapers conceded the building was “tiny” but insisted, “Upon entering one is immediately impressed with the charm of the place—its neatly arranged shelves, its rows of magazines and tables inviting the visitor to remain to read. The walls are of white plasterboard, and the windows are hung with neat curtains, a gift from the library staff.”

But the employees found the physical facilities left much to be desired. The stove on which the employees depended for heat blew up one day, coating Ely, Deschauer and most of the books with a thick layer of soot. Director Ely later recalled that the stove pipe “fell down regularly,” and that, on cold wet mornings, staff members “slid around on two inches of ice.” When the oil stove finally was replaced by one fed with coal, the librarians had to fill it themselves.

“Temporary” Quarters

The Kiwanis Club of Berwyn apparently “felt a pang” at the appearance of the library. Although the name of the real estate firm had long since been removed from the large three-sided sign atop the building and replaced with the designation, “Berwyn Public Library,” the Kiwanians optimistically painted in words proclaiming it to be only “Temporary Quarters.”

Despite the questionable accommodations, library services continued to grow. Through arrangements with the Chicago and Oak Park libraries, patrons had access to many more volumes than
the 6,000 books housed in the Berwyn facility. Circulation grew from 17,511 in the last four months of 1926 to 90,926 in 1927.

Of the early library’s 4,500 subscribers, 1,000 were children. Testifying to the enthusiasm of the city’s youngest readers, it was noted that, on the day after New Year’s, “400 children crowded into the library to return books they had read over the holiday.”

Apparently concluding that, even though their present building had limitations, the site itself had possibilities, the Library Board asked the City Council to place a referendum on the ballot asking voters to authorize a bond issue to purchase the present Oak Park Avenue site plus 30 feet of adjoining property.

The Board estimated it would need $10,000 to purchase the property and an additional $75,000 to erect a building, but the proposal apparently never got off the ground. Soon newspapers were reporting an alternate proposal—an agreement by the City Council to sell city-owned land to the library for construction of a new building.

A triangle of land bounded by Oak Park and Grove Avenues and 23rd Street had been purchased by the city as a site on which to build a municipal hall. However, the property could not be used for that purpose until a covenant in the deed expired, thus opening the possibility of other developments at that location.

With city and library officials undecided as to whether to build a two-story library for an estimated $75,000 or a combined services building housing the library and other city departments for $150,000, it was suggested that both proposals be placed before the voters as bond issue referendums. Optimistic Library Board members found an architect to begin drawing up plans for a “small but stately” new building.

“The times look rosy,” the Berwyn Beacon gushed with seeming justification.

Then came that black October day in 1929 when the stock market crashed. All thoughts of library construction crashed along with it.
The 1926 home of the Berwyn Public Library at 2214–16 Oak Park Avenue. (Photo courtesy of the Berwyn Historical Society)

1920s BESTSELLERS

Main Street • Sinclair Lewis
So Big • Edna Ferber
The Private Life of Helen of Troy • John Erskine
The Bridge of San Luis Rey • Thornton Wilder
All Quiet on the Western Front • Erich Remarque
1930s

Branching Out

In those dark Depression times, the library became a valued source of recreation and information, and branch libraries were seen as a way to serve patrons in all parts of the city. By 1930, the Berwyn Library had given up its quarters in the old real estate building and had spread to three locations:

- The Central Branch located in one room of a commercial building at 6910 Cermak Road was open daily except Sunday from 9 A.M. to 8:30 P.M.
- The South Branch already had moved twice: first to 3204 Grove Avenue, and within a few months to 3118 Oak Park Avenue, where it was open from 2 to 6 P.M. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and from 6:30 to 8:30 P.M. Tuesday and Saturday. Programs included a 10 A.M. Saturday story hour for children.
- The North Branch, located in a portable classroom building adjacent to Havlicek School near Elmwood Avenue and 15th Street, was open from 2 to 6 P.M. Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday and from 6:30 to 8:30 P.M. Monday. The space was provided rent free by North Berwyn School District 98.

The decision to create library branches was shaped in large part by the city’s historical geographic divide. Some 75 years later in a paper written for a class at Dominican University in River Forest, library science student James Chlipala would describe the Berwyn Public Library’s development as “A Tale of Two Cities.”
“Berwyn has maintained its historical growth pattern of being in essence two cities, South and North,” Chlipala wrote, “once physically separated by swamplands, now divided by cultural and ethnic migration patterns.”

That view was supported in *Historic Berwyn*, a publication based on Berwyn Historical Society material. North and South Berwyn not only were separated by some 1½ miles of farmland, the publication noted, but for many years their residents received mail from different post offices, drew water and electric power from separate sources and traveled over roads that changed names from one end of the city to another.

Although the physical division was largely erased in the building boom of the 1920s that subdivided the farms and prairies, a persistent North/South mindset led to decades of debate over the merits of a central library as opposed to a branch system.

It also led to a continuing search for bigger and better accommodations in various areas of the city, ultimately taking public library services to 16 main and branch locations for a total of 19 sites when harking back to the precedent-setting private lending libraries. *(Please see Appendix I: Berwyn Library Location Time Line on page 153 for a complete listing.)*

Often the library moved to quarters just across the street or down the block from previous sites. For example, the initial South Branch location at 3204 Grove Avenue was just down the street from the pioneering lending library that had opened in the 1890s in Mr. Lackey’s dry goods store. Its second home at 3118 Oak Park Avenue was just a few doors away from the children’s library organized by the Woman’s Club in 1922.

Reflecting the library’s desire to serve Berwyn’s changing population, the North Branch housed the library’s newly acquired Czech language collection. That focus on acculturation continues to this day, with the most recent addition being a Spanish language collection in 1996.

By 1932, the library was offering Saturday morning story hours for children in the first through fourth grades and reading clubs for fifth through eighth grades not only in its own North and South Branches but also in space provided rent free in the Gospel Tabernacle at 2212 Oak Park Avenue. Soon through a cooperative effort with the schools, children were taking an active part in the
Saturday programming. The Berwyn Beacon described one event in which Custer School fourth graders used puppets to present the tale of Tar Baby and the second graders prepared pictures for a retelling of the story of Little Black Sambo. The children’s book club puppet shows proved so popular that they became a regular Tuesday feature at the library.

Soon adults were requesting book discussion group of their own, and in February 1932, the library arranged for the Presbyterian Church, 32nd Street and Clinton Avenue, to host the first meeting of the Berwyn Adult Community Book Club.

The Berwyn Tribune offered its perspective on the expanded services in a June 26, 1932, story headlined, “Berwyn Library Business Booms in Depression.”

“The residents of Berwyn in these disturbed times are discovering in increasing numbers that the city library . . . affords a haven both pleasant and profitable,” the newspaper noted. “Adult readers, many of them possessed of greater leisure than was theirs in more prosperous periods, are turning not only to the enjoyment of popular light fiction but also to a study of books on economics and philosophy.”

To better serve its patrons, the North Branch moved to 6405½ W. 16th Street, the heart of the north side business district. The North and South Branches were open from 2 to 8 P.M. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and from 6:30 to 8:30 P.M. Monday. The Main or Central Library at 6909 Cermak Road was open from 9:00 A.M. to 8:30 P.M. every day except Sunday.

First City-Library Dispute

Just how much residents appreciated the respite provided by the library during this bleak era in American history can be seen in their response to newspaper reports of a dispute between the mayor and the Library Board over control of library finances and personnel.

Perceived overlaps and contradictions in state legislation regarding the respective powers of libraries and municipalities would spark conflict between the Berwyn Library Board and
Berwyn City government several times over the course of the library’s long history. But never again would public passions be as aroused as in the early 1930s, fed as they were by the era’s colorful, editorializing approach to reporting the news of the day.

Headlines decrying “threats of political manipulation” and “Big Library Melodrama” inspired growing numbers of ordinary citizens to attend meetings of the Library Board and City Council in late 1931. Community organizations such as the Woman’s Club, League of Women Voters, and Kiwanis Club weighed in on the controversy, and a new organization, Friends of the Library, was formed to give patrons a stronger voice in how their library should be run. The climax came in 1933 when some 400 people crowded into City Council chambers to defend their library.

According to Mrs. Gladys Orr, a member of the Library Board and one of the original Woman’s Club lobbyists for a public library, the trouble began in the summer of 1931 with a request from Mayor Frank Novotny that the library requisition all supplies through the city.

“In short,” Mrs. Orr later wrote, “the city (would) assume entire control of library finances.” She maintained that state library law “assigned to library directors exclusive control of the expenditure of all moneys collected to the credit of the library fund.” Mrs. Orr conceded that “all money received for the library was to be deposited in the treasury of the city,” but she insisted it was to be “kept separate and apart from other moneys of the city.”

The Library Board declined to make the procedural changes requested by the mayor. The city, in turn, declined to pay the library’s bills.

The Library Board finally agreed to turn petty cash over to the city each month. However, when city administrators began questioning salaries, Berwyn Library trustees vigorously defended their authority by citing state laws they said assigned to library boards “the appointment of the librarian and assistants and the fixing of their salaries.”

That December of 1931, a seemingly routine City Council agenda item on Library Board reappointments turned out to have one important element missing—the name of Mr. Frederick Dole. President of the Library Board since its inception in 1925, Mr.
Dole had been praised by the *Berwyn Beacon* for his “steadfastness of character and immunity from political intrigue and persuasion.”

Mrs. Orr apparently thought the omission a matter of mayoral pique, recalling that Mayor Novotny earlier had said of Mr. Dole, “Nobody is going to criticize me and get away with it.”

The Berwyn press thought the purging of Mr. Dole, when added to two pre-existing vacancies, offered the mayor a way to appoint three replacements and “gain control of the Board.”

The newspaper predictions proved accurate, for on the day before Christmas 1931, newly appointed Board Members Gordon Best, E. J. Drije, and George Strnad, together with incumbents Frank Shanahan and Mrs. L. H. Keeve, called a special meeting.

“The Library Board’s last stand” was the colorful way the *Berwyn Beacon* described that assembly. “Bylaws [which called for elections in June] were repudiated. . . ,” the newspaper noted. Mrs. Skeels, who had stepped up from vice president to acting president when Mr. Dole was ousted, was replaced by Mr. Shanahan. Mr. Best was elected vice president and Mr. Strnad, secretary.

“Political manipulation!” the press protested.

“No consideration was given to politics of any kind,” Mayor Novotny insisted in a communication printed in a publication called *Berwyn Events*. “Certainly, no one can deny that Messrs. Shanahan, Best, Drije, and Strnad are men of high character and reputation.

“The law intended that the library shall be an independent branch of the city government, and free it shall be as long as I am mayor,” Mr. Novotny affirmed. “[But] the library is a part of city government. It is maintained by taxes levied by the City Council. Under the law, the Council is the sole judge of how much money the library shall have to spend. The Board of Directors of the Library has the exclusive control of its expenditures . . . [but the] Board has no right to expend a greater sum than that allowed by the City Council.”

Describing the current economic depression as “the greatest crisis ever known,” the mayor noted that “the groan of the overburdened taxpayer is heard everywhere.” In response, he said, he had called a July conference of all city department heads and told them, “Everything [that was] not absolutely necessary was to
be abandoned. But, instead of reducing its allowed expenditure of $19,000, the library spent over $21,000. We had to cripple other city departments to keep the library going."

Library Trustee Orr found the mayor’s comments "incomprehensible."

"Mr. Dole insisted that expenses be kept to the minimum," Mrs. Orr said. "The latest financial report shows $5,114.04 to the credit of the library fund."

The conflict took on new dimensions. At the first Library Board meeting of 1932, the name of Mr. Charles Zak, a former city alderman, was submitted as an applicant for the position of assistant librarian.

"This appointment would mean dropping the present assistant, a college graduate with special training in an accredited library school," Mrs. Orr noted. "It would be exceedingly detrimental to the service."

Newspaper accounts of that meeting focused on the appointment of a Library Board committee to investigate Mr. Zak’s qualifications. No heed was paid to the absence from the meeting of Trustee Frank E. Dunning. The absence proved significant.

"Mayor ‘Fires’ Dunning"

That was the headline the Berwyn Tribune placed over the January 22 story reporting allegations by the mayor that Mr. Dunning had "absented himself from Board meetings without reason," and "by threats of violence had attempted to interfere with President Frank Shanahan’s conduct of office."

The highly respected Rev. Carl P. Graff was hastily appointed by Mayor Novotny to fill the Dunning vacancy. But the appointment did nothing to calm an aroused press.

"With the summary removal of Frank Dunning, . . . the mayor now will hold an overwhelming balance of power . . . [and be] able to whip the Library Board into submission and get them to pass anything he wants done—as for example the appointing of an ex-alderman as a librarian assistant," the Berwyn Beacon editorialized.
“One possibility can save the situation—a general uprising by the people of Berwyn.”

The people responded.

“A delegation of nearly 100 residents stormed the Board meeting and blocked the plan to appoint Charles E. Zak as assistant librarian,” reported the February 12 issue of the Tribune. “A vote resulted in a landslide against him.”

In May, a coalition of Trustees Skeels, Orr, Best, and Mrs. H. P. Christian narrowly beat back a proposal to close the library’s Central Branch. The Board was able to put political differences aside long enough to curb expenses by cutting staff and persuading landlords to reduce the library’s rental fees.

But that same month, the political battle lines were redrawn when Mayor Novotny replaced three out of the four Library Board members whose terms were expiring. With the City Council splitting 7–7 on two successive roll calls, the mayor cast the deciding vote that ousted Trustees Shanahan, Christian, and Keeve; retained Trustee Strnad; and brought new mayoral appointees Messrs. Anthony Campagna, George Vhynalek, and W. C. Wharton to the Board.

The changing of the guard was completed at the Library Board’s June meeting. Mr. Drije was elected president; Mr. Wharton, vice president; and Mr. Strnad, secretary.

By December 1932, the political wars were on in earnest.

“Political meddling . . . precipitated such a climax Tuesday that Best, Orr, and Skeels suddenly took their hats and coats and left the meeting,” reported the December 9 issue of the Beacon.

That walkout was precipitated by a vote won by the five-member majority of Trustees Drije, Strnad, Wharton, Campagna, and Vhynalek to discharge two assistant librarians described by the Beacon as “meritorious and qualified” and replace them at reduced salaries with two unemployed Berwyn girls.

President Drije’s refusal to allow either residents or Board members to speak out in opposition during the meeting inspired a flurry of letters to the editors of the local newspapers.

One letter writer in attendance at the meeting noted that the heated controversy led one candidate for employment to immediately withdraw.
“She showed her fine sense of justice when she said she did not want the position at the expense of the incumbent against whom there was no complaint whatsoever,” maintained letter writer Jessie Hartsough. “[But] when the second applicant was questioned her mother interrupted with: ‘Don’t make her answer—don’t embarrass the child.’

“And so,” the letter continued, “a motion was passed which would place a ‘so-called child’ in charge of one of the branch libraries. Was the president of the Board facetious when he requested Miss Ely to ‘train the child’ to fill the position? Is our library to become a training school as well as an employment bureau?”

Public concern grew. A protest group formed under the name of Friends of the Library and crowded into City Hall along with other Berwyn residents for the first City Council meeting of the new year.

“Charging that five new members of the Library Board have turned the library into a ‘job agency’ and lowered the standards of that institution . . . a large delegation of residents demanded the removal of five ‘uncultured’ [Board] members,” reported the January 6, 1933, issue of the *Berwyn Tribune*.

The Berwyn League of Women Voters submitted a communication protesting the manner in which these members were running the library. Mrs. F. DeWilde, described in the press as a “south end socialite and civic leader,” presented a resolution asking the mayor and Council to remove the five members.

Maintaining it was “only fair that we hear both sides,” Alderman Carl Anderson closed off further discussion with a motion to refer the matter to a Committee of the Whole. It was only a temporary postponement of the conflict.

### 400 Protest at City Hall

Four hundred residents “jammed every inch of sitting and standing room in the City Hall balcony” for that Committee of the Whole meeting, the *Berwyn Tribune* reported. Letters were read from the Berwyn Kiwanis Club and the Berwyn Post of the American
Legion and Legion Auxiliary, again urging removal of the five members. The newspaper then detailed the following exchange:

Drije said that prior to the appointment of the new members, the board had always spent more money than its appropriation... “We inherited a debt of $5,000 on tax anticipation warrants which the board had issued, the interest on the warrants and other debts. We saw that economy was imperative because the revenues had been decreased. I asked Miss Ely for suggestions which would reduce expenses. She flatly told me that she didn’t know where we could cut... Finally, we recommended closing the Central branch until funds for its support were available. This was not an attempt to reduce the service—we assumed the taxpayers... would be willing to walk to the north or south branches for their books if they knew that the extra blocks they walked meant a real saving in their tax bills.

Drije said that the attitude of the librarian and other members was “to get all the money we can.”... In spite of their efforts, we got new library quarters and lower rents. We saved money on internal expenses and salaries. During the past year we lived within our revenues; paid off the tax warrant indebtedness, the interest and some of the debts... In other words, we have applied honest business methods to the library for the first time in years.”

At this point... Wharton, head of the finance committee, said, “The library does not need the full tax levy for efficient operation. We will ask for a 25 percent reduction this year. It is my opinion that we do not need a librarian and three assistants. One for each of the three branches is sufficient. It seems to me that the people would rather have fewer librarians and more books.”

Miss Ely, the librarian, then took the floor to refute some of Drije’s statements about finances. She declared the board had never spent more than its income. She said all money comes from the city offices and can’t possibly be spent unless it is there. She said the library never got all the money it asked for.

“During the past year we increased the circulation of books by 50,000,” Miss Ely said. “Demands for service are increasing, and we need all the funds we are entitled to. We don’t want more than that.”
The *Berwyn Tribune* noted Miss L. Price, state supervisor of library extension work, supported Miss Ely’s evaluation and concluded, “The local library [Berwyn] is poorly manned in comparison with other cities.”

In a meeting increasingly interrupted by audience comments, hissing and applause, the newspaper reported, “Alderman [Charles] Treder made a motion that the matter be referred to the mayor ‘with power to act’ . . . and while the shouting continued Mayor Novotny rapped the order for adjournment.”

It was not until the end of March that a way was found to end the stalemate. The City Council accepted the resignations of Trustees Drije and Strnad based on announcements that they would be candidates for public office in the spring elections. They were immediately replaced with Mrs. Louis A. Ciha and Dr. Albert W. Hall.

“We are gratified to see that Dr. Hall and Mrs. Ciha have been appointed new members of the library board,” applauded the *Berwyn Beacon*. “These appointees meet the approval of all friends of the library. . . . They have no political affiliations and have the interest of the library at heart.”

The newspaper’s words would prove prescient, for in Dr. Hall the library would find a tireless worker and inspiring leader who would serve the Board for 30 years until his goal of building permanent homes for the North and South Branches had been achieved.

With the addition of Dr. Hall and Mrs. Ciha, the Library Board achieved stability. The new harmony was needed because the library faced some very real problems.

While conceding the cost of operating the Berwyn Library was the lowest in Illinois, State Library Extension Supervisor Price had noted this economy had been achieved at a price. Berwyn had only one-tenth the number of books required for a city its size.

In October 1937, Rev. Graff replaced the retiring Mrs. Skeels as Library Board president and immediately pledged to address this shortcoming. By June 1, 1938, nearly 3,000 new books had been acquired. Nevertheless, Berwyn’s total of 23,000 volumes was still far short of the two books per capita, or approximately 100,000 volumes, that library standards called for in a city of Berwyn’s size.
Berwyn’s books may have been few but they were highly used. In the Depression era, libraries became centers for literary escape and economic hope. The prodigious growth in patrons made nomads of Berwyn’s librarians, who were constantly on the move throughout the 1930s to more expansive rental quarters.

One such move in May 1933 brought the Main/Central Branch from Cermak Road to the second floor of the former Murphy Building at 6828 Windsor Avenue. Re-designated as the South Branch, it took up residence in nearly the same spot where Mr. Lackey’s store had housed the little lending library some 30 years before.

This period of growth not only sparked changes in Berwyn branch locations but alterations in library atmosphere within those branches. It was a change reflected in libraries throughout the country as well.

“At the turn of the century a library was a collection of books, of elaborate bindings and small type, housed in a lofty and dismal room,” noted a newspaper report of 1939. “SILENCE” was the command posted on every wall, and the librarian looked very able to enforce it. The sprawling Boston ferns and rubber plants established the relationship between the library and the old time ‘undertaker parlor.’

“Then came the Age of Advertising and interest in psychology and reactions and vitamins. The [Berwyn] Library was ‘stepped up’ and the result is the friendly, homelike library of today. The chairs are comfortable, the lighting is good, the books are bright and clean and the librarians are intelligent, well-educated women capable of locating information on Diesel engines or the ‘Story of Puss in [sic] Boots.’”

The decade closed on a high note as the Berwyn Public Library for the first time was able to move one of its branches into rent-free, city-owned quarters. In 1939, the Cermak Road location was closed, and the entire lower level of the newly constructed City Hall was designated for use as the Central Branch with the words “Berwyn Public Library” carved into the stonework over the entrance at 6720 W. 26th Street.
In 1939, the new Berwyn City Hall provides the library with space for a Central Branch specifically designed for library use. (Photo courtesy of the Berwyn Public Library)

1930s Bestsellers

_Shadows on the Rock_ • Willa Cather  
_The Good Earth_ • Pearl Buck  
_Good-bye Mr. Chips_ • James Hilton  
_Gone with the Wind_ • Margaret Mitchell  
_The Grapes of Wrath_ • John Steinbeck
Library Finds Home in City Hall

The City Hall branch meant the Library now had room enough to rent out meeting space to others, and in January 1940 the Berwyn Recreation Commission rented space at the North Branch for $25 per month.

But some aldermen felt the library now had more space than needed. The January 12, 1940, *Berwyn News* reported that, during City Council discussions on the year’s appropriation ordinance, “it was proposed that to effect a savings to the city of some $8,000, the main branch of the Berwyn Public Library at 6828 Windsor Avenue and the North Branch at 6405½ W. 16th Street be discontinued.” Some aldermen considered the City Hall branch sufficient to serve residents’ needs since it was centrally located and accessible to all sections of the city.

Library Director Ely made a “strong defense” for retaining the branches, the *News* reported:

“It would be almost an impossibility to house all the books in any one of the branches,” Miss Ely said. “For the year 1939, there were 25,460 individuals who made use of library cards. Borrowers were roughly: North Branch, 51,609; Central, 65,735; Main, 96,664. These figures do not include those hundreds who visited the library and made use of books for reference.”

As to finances, Director Ely said, “The Library Board is allowed by state law to levy a tax of one and two-tenths mils on each dollar of assessed valuation. Its budget this year, as last, calls for an expenditure of $25,000. About half of this is for salaries . . . one-fourth for new books and periodicals; the balance for bindery, rent, postage, repairs, etc."

1940s
The following month, Rev. Graff, now Library Board president, asked for the floor “for a couple of minutes” at the Berwyn City Council meeting, the *Beacon* reported. “Then, for 47½ minutes the chambers of City Hall echoed with oratorical fireworks.

“Mr. Graff pointed out that only 27,000 volumes were in possession of the Berwyn Library while Cicero had two books for every resident . . . and Evanston had three. He said 30,000 volumes would be added, politicians or no politicians.

“Theoretically hurling one of Mr. Webster’s dictionaries at the heads of aldermen who he claimed were trying to tear down the fine things that were being accomplished by the Berwyn Library . . . Mr. Graff concluded, ‘Some Berwyn aldermen are numskulls.’”

By April, the matter was settled, and the Library Board renewed its rental agreement for the North Branch at $37.50 per month with a two-year option of $40.

It was in 1940 that Berwyn librarians began going out to the schools to instruct children on the use of the library. They followed up with a practice lesson for children at one of the library branches.

The vigorous outreach paid off. In 1940, a total of 234,501 books were read by 26,170 patrons, “the largest use of home books since the library was organized,” the newspapers reported.

By January 1942, the Library Board was feeling secure enough to ask city officials to increase the library tax levy to 2 mils. Board members said this would enable the library to create a fourth branch in the northwest section of the city. They estimated the cost of the additional branch at $300 per month.

Alderman Victor Spina introduced an ordinance calling for the levy increase, but it died in the City Council for lack of a second. He vowed to follow up with an ordinance asking Council approval for a levy referendum, but by that time the Council, the library, and, in fact, the entire country were focused on the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor and the adjustments that would be needed in a nation at war.
Liberal Responds to War Needs

By January 1943, the Berwyn Library staff was enthusiastically promoting a Victory Book Drive to encourage residents to donate books for the Armed Forces.

By April, the library was setting up civil defense displays and advertising its readiness to “find the answers to any national defense questions.” By July, the library was responding to gasoline restrictions with displays featuring “vacation destinations close to home.”

That fall, Mr. Elmer Davis, the director of the Office of War Information in Washington, D.C., sent a message to librarians throughout the country:

“In the present war, librarians carry a responsibility such as they have never carried in our history . . . to see that the people of this country have the facts before them.”

The American Library Association then defined those responsibilities as:

“A vision of a better world; the role of the common man in the struggle; the effect of war on our society; an accurate comprehension of what our enemies fight for as well as our allies.”

Such wartime idealism may have been universally endorsed, but persuading politicians to back it up with a practical investment of dollars proved difficult.

Back in May, the Library Board had approved the hiring of a Central Branch librarian at a salary of $100 per month. By September, the Board optimistically promised to increase salaries to $220 for the head librarian, $160 for first assistants, and $120 for second assistants.

But by December, faced with a city budget more than $40,000 out of balance, the Berwyn City Council cut the library’s budget request for 1943. The promised library salary increases were eliminated, and new book funding was reduced to $2,000.

“Cutting the new book allowance from $5,614 to $2,000 would wipe out the prospect of new books at a time when they are especially in demand by people attempting to equip themselves for technical war jobs,” protested Dr. Hall, the new Library Board president.
The Emerson School PTA supported the library’s request, and the Berwyn Woman’s Club further cited the increased demand for technical books by young men planning to enter specialized branches of the armed services.

As to the salary increases, the *Beacon* editorialized:

“Present salary schedules place all but the chief librarian at a salary level below the men who collect the garbage.”

Low wages forced many library employees to seek jobs elsewhere, and by September 1943 the library was forced to close at 1 P.M. on Saturdays “because of the shortage of help.”

Also in September, the *Beacon* reported that the City Council had voted against a transfer of $335 in library funds that would have enabled the Board to adjust salaries so that trained librarians could be hired to replace those who had left.

One obstacle for city officials was uncertainty as to how to interpret War Manpower Commission rules. A Commission wage freeze exemption permitted raises for municipal employees, but no one knew whether library personnel could be counted as municipal employees.

The Library Board finally resolved the matter in October 1948 by taking money out of book and periodical funds to increase all salaries by 5 percent.

The library succeeded in finding enough money to subscribe to magazines for teenagers, part of a new emphasis on services for Berwyn young people. Special seating sections were set aside for teens in the South and Central Branches, and adjacent shelves were filled with some 700 books of interest to teens plus such magazines as *Mademoiselle*, *Calling All Boys*, and *Calling All Girls*.

The Library Board was nearly as short-handed during the 1940s as the library staff. Throughout the decade, the Board was forced to cancel many meetings for lack of a quorum. In 1944, despite having a full complement of nine members, the Board was unable to muster a quorum for seven out of its 10 meetings. By October of that year, patience apparently was wearing thin. The Board decided to count only “active” members toward achieving the quorum needed to conduct business. Bylaws were amended to specify that “a member shall be considered inactive after three consecutive absences.” Nevertheless, absenteeism continued, especially during the winter months, and it was not until May 1950
that the Board enforced its new policy by dropping two members from the active list.

Library trustees’ interest may have been waning, but library patron interest was growing at such a rate during the 1940s that the Library Board saw the need for further expansion. In April 1947, President Hall was authorized to negotiate with the owner of the North Branch building at 6405½ W. 16th Street, to see if library services might be extended into a second storefront adjacent to the first. In December, a lease extension was approved at a monthly rental of $50 for 1948 with a two-year option to renew, and the library’s official address became 6409 W. 16th Street.

By 1948, the Library Board was hoping to expand its South Branch space as well. The Board optimistically agreed that, as soon as a vacancy occurred, it would move its South Branch to a location on Oak Park Avenue, but by May 1949 economic reality had set in, and the Board renewed its Windsor Avenue lease for three years at $195 per month.

“At the top of the dingy stairway is the poorly lighted and poorly ventilated room . . . located above a bakery and hardware store . . . which houses the Library [branch] serving residents south of the railroad tracks.” (Photo and caption from a campaign brochure pointing out the arduous climb and inhospitable conditions at the South Branch on Windsor Avenue)

Residents examine the 25-by-90-foot retail space on 16th Street that housed the library’s North Branch. (Photo from a campaign brochure citing the inadequacy of this branch serving some 20,000 Berwyn residents living north of Cermak Road.)
“Berwyn’s crowded library conditions are graphically portrayed in this photo taken at 8 P.M. at the South Branch at 6828 Windsor Avenue,” noted the caption for this photo published in the Berwyn Life-Beacon. The photo helped spark a bond issue to build two branch libraries. (Photo courtesy of Berwyn Life)

1940s Bestsellers

*How Green Was My Valley* • Richard Llewellyn  
*The Song of Bernadette* • Franz Werfel  
*The Robe* • Lloyd C. Douglas  
*Forever Amber* • Kathleen Winsor  
*Dinner at Antoine’s* • Francis Parkinson Keyes
Tight budgets continued into the next decade. The total library budget for 1950 was only $32,541. But although library salaries may have seemed stingy, employees enjoyed other perks. Minutes of the April 1950 Board meeting reflect generous vacation schedules including four weeks of vacation after three years of service; three weeks after one year; and one day for each month under one year.

Such vacations apparently were made possible by the closing in rotation of the various library branches during the summer months.

In the years between the Great Depression and the end of World War II, great changes took place in patrons’ expectations of their library. This letter to the editor of the Berwyn Life newspaper summarizes some of those changes:

“I clearly remember the Depression years when both fiction and nonfiction gave my entire family much pleasure when economizing was so necessary, particularly in the line of recreation,” wrote Georgiana Otto of Berwyn. “We found books of games to play and things to do that kept us well within our budget. In 1941, when I returned to the business world during the war years, library books were of great service to me in the white collar world.”

On the other hand, Otto’s letter demonstrated that some things do not change fast enough.

“One of the first places I intend to take my grandchildren when they are able to read is to the library,” Otto wrote. “I sincerely trust that by that time we will not have to climb up those steep stairs at the present South Branch.”
As the decade of the 1950s opened, the cost of operating the Berwyn Library was $1.03 per person. But residents were beginning to question whether that Spartan sum could provide adequate service.

In a 1951 project for the Graduate School of Library Science, University of Southern California, Gladys Jolidon Rohde, a former Berwyn Library employee, offered this perspective:

In the last five years, a tremendous growth has taken place in the north and south ends of town. These newcomers are mainly young couples with families of young children, posing a considerable problem for the schools. The library, then, has these population groups to serve: the older, conservative, but culturally more advanced group in what is known as South Berwyn; the newer Americans, who because of a bilingual bringing up are not fully assimilated even unto the third generation; and this new influx of heterogeneous people who are partly both and partly neither.

Culturally the town has very limited facilities. It does not even have a high school of its own.

Rohde noted that, in 1948, the library had 37,613 volumes, about half of them in the South (Main) branch.

The Main Branch is housed in the second floor of a double story building in the midst of the South Berwyn business district. Its location is excellent, but the stairway is steep; it is hot in summer and cold in winter; and it is overflowing.

The Central Branch is the only one built to be a library, located in the basement of City Hall. It was intended to be the main branch, but almost no work space was provided, and it is a comparatively barren area as far as population goes. It is the only branch that has room for additional book stacks.

The North Branch is located on 16th Street in a single-story building. It thus has display windows and opens directly off the street. However, it is more overcrowded than the South. Promotional work in the schools has brought in hordes of children and many of their parents. The new families are asking for books on current affairs and development. On some days the circulation is so high, the shelves are almost bare, especially of children’s books.
Recalling her days as an employee of the Berwyn Public Library, Rohde wrote:

The strictest economy was required. The whole support of the library was by direct appropriation from the City Council and the annual “Battle of the Budget” was a time of crisis for us all.

Rohde cited a 1949 Berwyn Library budget of $30,493 and recalled the book budget was cut drastically that year and again in 1950 to allow “rather sharp salary increases.” She said the goal of her university project was to find a way to raise the total library budget to $40,000 in 1951 to rebuild the “sadly depleted book stock.” However, she conceded even her best proposal would fall short at $38,882.

Rohde received an “A” on her paper, and in a written commentary her instructor, Althea Warren, noted, “Berwyn is below nearly all Postwar [library] Standards, which is inevitable until it gets a $1.50 per capita appropriation.” The instructor noted the under-funding affected more than books. “A staff of 11½ people provide 23,930 man hours of service a year. Therefore, every 100 persons in the town get only 46.81 hours of service when the amount required in Postwar Standards is 75.”

A November 1951 article in the *Berwyn Life* supported the professional’s view: “Berwyn, though it has made remarkable advancement since it was reorganized in 1925, is still about 50 percent under what is optimum size. About two books per capita is considered ideal. Thus, Berwyn should have 200,000 volumes, but it has less than 50,000.”

In that article, Director Ely conceded the number and type of books purchased were “largely determined by the funds available.” For that reason, she said, the Berwyn Library did not purchase films, believing that “a library should concern itself primarily with books unless it has a great deal of money to spend.”

By July 1952, city officials were beginning to talk about new library facilities. Citing the inadequacy of the North and South library branches, Alderman Harold Collier, a former Library Board member, proposed that the City Council authorize a $400,000 bond issue to
build new facilities. Collier noted the library spent more than $3,000 annually for rental space and suggested buying a house for the South Branch.

Alderman B.J. Kanak suggested incorporating the South Branch into the new fire house the city was planning to build, and, in December, Mayor William Kriz formally proposed to the City Council that a new $60,000 south end fire station be constructed with a second floor added to house the South Branch. The addition was estimated to cost only $20,000 more. But, the next month, the proposal was dropped when city officials learned a bond would have to be issued to pay for it.

Centralization Proposed

In May 1954, the All Berwyn Committee (A.B.C.), a nonpartisan organization serving as a public forum for community issues, focused residents’ attention on the library through a survey that concluded the facilities were inadequate.

That fall, the A.B.C. explored the possibility of replacing the three library branches with one centrally located facility. Proponents maintained it would end duplication of books and services, thus enabling the library to provide a greater variety of specialized volumes. Rev. Dan R. Ludwig, pastor of Concordia Lutheran Church and the proposal’s leading proponent, maintained that nowhere in the United States was there a city of comparable size that maintained three large libraries.

But Library Board and staff told the A.B.C. that budget limitations precluded the purchase of specialized books. They maintained that patrons could access such volumes through interlibrary loans. Further, because of the distance between the city’s north and south borders, they felt the branch system better served public needs.

The A.B.C. followed up with a poll of its member organizations and found the majority also favored three libraries. Both North and South Berwyn Parent Teacher Associations supported the branch system. Thus armed, the Library Board submitted to the City Council a unanimous resolution calling on
the city to maintain the branch system and “give immediate consideration . . . to the erection of two branch library buildings.”

By January 1955, the City Council’s Library Committee was actively considering the Library’s request for an April referendum to raise $250,000 for the acquisition of two sites, construction of new branch libraries, and the purchase of additional books and equipment.

Alderman Rex Carter asked fellow committee members to recommend the referendum to the Council, but Aldermen Rudolph Rolenec and Edward Nemec were not convinced the branch system was the answer. Alderman Rolenec said the shortage of large vacant properties in the city would make site selection difficult. And taking a view that was all too prescient but given little heed at the time, he emphasized the need to provide parking.

However, Library Board members insisted parking was “no problem” at the current branches. They maintained that a large central library would require more parking because many residents would need to drive rather than walk there.

Decades later, staff members would call that inability to see the need for adequate parking “a failure of the imagination.” But in the post-World War II era, no one anticipated the growth of two- and three-car families that would congest city streets and constrict the usefulness of the library branches.

Library staff and Board focused instead on bricks and mortar, not wheels. In 1955, the Board suggested constructing two 100-by-75-foot buildings with money to be raised through the sale by the city of general obligation bonds to be paid off over 20 years. Costs were estimated at $20,000 for land purchases; $180,000 for construction; and $50,000 for furnishings and additional books.

Book purchases already had become an issue between city and library officials. In February, Dr. Hall asked the city for 10 percent salary increases for library employees, but Mayor Kriz said they could be afforded only through a tax increase referendum. Alderman Carter’s compromise suggestion to take $2,000 from the book fund and allot it for raises was voted down by the City Council.

The salary impasse proved no impediment to progress on the building proposal. On March 6, 1955, the Berwyn Life reported
that the City Council had authorized Chapman and Cutler, a Chicago bond house, to prepare legal steps for a referendum.

OK to Build—But Where?

One month later, City Attorney Frank Pavek advised that state statutes required the Library Board not only to have definite plans for construction before holding a public referendum, but also to obtain an option on proposed building sites or at least make some progress toward their acquisition.

One year later, site selection was still pending.

The Board had identified desirable land parcels at 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue and 16th Street and Euclid Avenue. But although the South Berwyn site readily gained the support of city officials, the mayor and aldermen felt the north end suggestion was too close to the 16th Street business district. It not only would create parking problems, city officials said, but also would present a safety hazard for children crossing the heavily traveled street.

Using a portion of the city-owned 19th Street parkway at Cuyler Avenue for north branch construction was seen by officials as a better solution. Not only would it offer a more “residential location,” said Mayor Kriz, but it would save approximately $17,500. Since only $10,000 had been appropriated in the 1956 budget for the purchase of library sites, that money could be concentrated on the purchase of the south end land and thereby speed up dates for a referendum and ensuing construction.

However, library officials thought the 19th Street location “too far from the center of the district and not convenient enough to schools to properly service students, one of the prime purposes of a branch.” Library Board members maintained that the 16th Street site was large enough to provide off-street parking, was located within walking distance of most north end schools and would permit the design of two similar buildings, thus decreasing construction costs.

In April 1956, with north site discussions still at an impasse, the Board urged the City Council to at least buy the 34th Street property. The aldermen authorized the purchase the following
month and continued to search for north end alternatives. Soon they were eyeing North Berwyn Grade School District land as an answer to their dilemma.

Despite reports the schools were short of playground space, North Berwyn School Board Member Raymond Cox agreed to bring to his board the city’s proposal to build a library on the playground at Lincoln School or in the area between Custer School and its annex. The result of that presentation, according to the July 1 issue of the *Berwyn Life*, was that “school board tempers flared and the proposal ultimately fell on deaf ears.”

On September 7, 1956, the *Berwyn Life* printed a photograph showing city officials and Mr. and Mrs. H. P. Sumrow working out details for the purchase of the 63-by-125-foot site on the southwest corner of 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue

Three days later, the Library Board formally voted to purchase an alternative North end site at 16th Street and Elmwood Avenue rather than 16th Street and Euclid Avenue as originally proposed.

Finally, on December 16, 1956, the aldermanic committee supported the Library Board’s position. Committee members informed the full Council that, although the $16,600 price for the Elmwood Avenue property was “excessive,” it was the most desirable site available. They noted it was close to North Berwyn schools, possessed “ample parking” and at 82-by-125-feet was larger than the Euclid Avenue site yet would cost $1,000 less.

The Council authorized the purchase through the deposit of $1,500 in earnest money with funds to complete the purchase to be appropriated in the 1957 budget.

“A referendum to raise sufficient funds for the construction of two new branch libraries can now go forward,” declared Alderman Carter.

The 1957 city budget included a $6,566 boost in library operating funds as well. Earlier pleas for salary increases for library employees at last were heard, and $3,764 was appropriated for raises. Similarly, the persistent shortfall in the book budget was addressed through an increased allocation of $2,000. Over the previous 10 years, while purchase prices had been rising at the rate of $1 per book, the library’s new book funding had increased by a total of only $175. Staff members at last had enough volumes to
offer some relief to patrons who frequently waited several weeks to obtain books.

Library Board and staff now could concentrate on the construction proposal presented on January 28, 1957, by Library Building Consultants Inc. of Evanston.

Based on the city’s population growth of nearly 4,000 residents between 1940 and 1950 and an anticipated nationwide increase in longevity, the consultants founded their building recommendations on a population projected to reach 70,000. *(Readers will note that 50 years later Berwyn still has not reached that number. According to the 2000 U.S. Census report, Berwyn’s population was 54,016.)*

Echoing the earlier Rohde study, the consultants observed that the Berwyn Library had averaged three books per capita per year since 1950, while American Library Association standards indicated up to 10 books per capita should be available for those 15 years and over, and as many as 10 to 30 for children.

“Library effort has been severely handicapped by three badly crowded distribution centers and a total book stock numerically far below the minimum essential to even begin to serve the community,” the consultants noted.

“The headquarters library is located at the top of a long and discouraging flight of stairs,” the consultants observed. “Seats are few and the opportunity to do reference or research work is practically nonexistent.”

The consultants concluded that, although the library staff was “doing a great deal to bridge the gap in the absence of good elementary school library service, even so, existing public library facilities are not at all conducive to study or attractive enough to begin to stimulate a desire to read for recreational purposes.”

They attributed this to the fact that the Berwyn Library was still operating at a cost of $1.03 per capita, “far below the financial standards adopted nearly 10 years earlier by the American Library Association (ALA)—$1.50 per capita for very limited or minimum service; $2.25 for reasonably good service; $3 for superior.”

Although the Berwyn Library’s per capita expenditures were projected to rise to $1.16 in 1955, the consultants still considered it “dangerously far below the very minimum. It must be revised
upward to give more than token service to Berwyn if new facilities are provided.”

As to location, the consultants noted that postwar ALA standards suggested that public libraries should be located within 1 to 1½ miles of every resident so that “the school-age child can travel alone.” They further noted that “the construction sites selected together with the facility in City Hall will place public library service almost equidistant from every home in Berwyn.”

The consultants recommended constructing two buildings that together would total 10,424 square feet. They anticipated that each new building would house at least 47,300 volumes or 100,000 in all, with additional room for growth.

### Mirror Image Design

Total construction cost was estimated at $383,000, but the consultants suggested the cost could be reduced if architects used a single building plan designed so it could be adapted to both sites through a mirror image reversal.

At least a partial basement to house heating and air conditioning equipment was considered essential, but consultants recommended full basement excavations at both building sites with portions of the basement to be finished later.

To pay for the buildings, consultants noted, “the City Council may issue bonds by ordinance to be spread over 20 years with an annual levy not to exceed 8⅓ cents per hundred dollars valuation.” However, they noted that amount would not cover full basement completion. Somewhat optimistically, the consultants concluded, “We believe the need is sufficiently great that at some future date residents would be willing to approve a special bond issue to finish the basements.”

In February 1957, the City Council authorized the Library Board to employ an architect, and at a special Library Board meeting on February 25, architects Robert A. Viren and John Considine of Berwyn were chosen to draw up preliminary plans and estimates for the two construction projects.
The mirror image proposal was adopted. Each site was to house a 50-by-75-foot one-story brick building. Two sides of both structures would be mainly windows “to admit plenty of light.” This would fulfill the consultants’ call for “a generous glass front that would enable outsiders to see the colorful and inviting interior . . . and at night would be a veritable illuminated showcase bringing to the attention of all passing by the wealth of information and pleasure that is theirs for the asking.”

Each branch would have a 16-foot ceiling with a mezzanine or balcony along one wall for an adult service area with book shelves and reading space. The lobby, foyer, children’s room work areas, rest rooms and rear entrances would have a 10-foot ceiling, lower than the mezzanine but a height the consultants had considered adequate to house overhead ducts for heating and ventilation.

Each site would provide what the consultants had projected as “adequate parking”—space for six cars at the South Branch and 20 cars at the North.

That “adequacy,” particularly with respect to the 34th Street branch, would remain a point of controversy. One month before construction began, Library Board member Charles Frye was still defending the parking lot plans against challenges from local business owners. In an August 1960 interview printed in the Berwyn Life, Mr. Frye conceded that “parking facilities won’t be perfect,” but suggested there would be enough to take care of library needs “because at times when churches and other facilities in the neighborhood are busiest, the library will not always be open.”

Goodbye, Ely—Hello, Belon

As fine-tuning of construction specifications and estimates dragged on, the library on June 7, 1957, sustained a double loss. On that date, Miss Ely, who had served as director since the library’s inception, announced her retirement. Assistant Librarian Mary Mize made a parallel announcement. Both resignations were to be effective August 1.
By July 19, 1957, the Library Board had a replacement lined up. Mrs. Jane M. Belon (later Shaw)* was hired at a salary of $5,780 per year beginning September 1.

A graduate of Indiana University, where she had majored in library science, history, and French, (Belon) Shaw most recently had been employed as a cataloguer at the Wilmette Public Library while she pursued a master’s degree at the University of Chicago’s Graduate Library School. Earlier positions included work at the Lewis Flight Propulsion Library in Cleveland, Ohio, and as U.S. post librarian at Fort Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska.

In November of that year, Library Board members and city aldermen jointly decided to finish the basements of both buildings to provide space for much-needed public meeting rooms for senior citizen movies and other programming.

Construction specifications and estimates were finalized at $371,000 and finally forwarded to the mayor and City Council in April 1958, only two months before the June 2 referendum.

Jane (Belon) Shaw, Director, 1957–59 (Photo courtesy (Belon) Shaw)

Referendum Impediments

However, by that time the decision to finish the basements of the new buildings had become so controversial that, on the eve of the referendum, Mayor Kriz was urging voters to approve the “long-

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Mrs. Belon later remarried and hereafter will be identified as Jane (Belon) Shaw.
needed public improvements” and not let “minor differences of opinion as to the structural plans . . . jeopardize the project. [Those differences] undoubtedly can be worked out,” the mayor said, “and recommendations of experts in the field of library construction should receive the greatest consideration.”

Alderman Rolenec led a vocal group of citizens opposing the referendum and especially the construction of the 10-foot-deep basement. In an impassioned speech reported in the June 1 edition of the Berwyn Life, he told the City Council “the creation of such a ‘hole’ would be against the city building code.”

Alderman Albert Frenette, chairman of the Council’s library committee, angrily asked why Alderman Rolenec had not questioned the basement earlier “when revisions could have been made, if necessary.” He insisted the code cited by Alderman Rolenec applied specifically to schools and only where 100 or more people would be gathering.

Speaking in support of the referendum, Alderman Sid Hanzlik said he was certain any corrections necessary in the structural plans could be made after the referendum was approved. And Mr. Rene Goier, then assistant city attorney and later circuit court judge, agreed it would be “almost an impossibility to enter such a major program without some minor changes becoming necessary.”

Basements were not the only impediment to the referendum’s passage. Costs originally estimated at $360,000 ($358,000 for construction and equipment; $2,000 for new books) had now risen to $371,000 and were a concern to many.

The election ballot itself presented problems. The referendum was presented in two parts but asked all Berwyn residents to vote on both sections. The first vote was to approve $171,000 in construction bonds for a North Berwyn library branch; the second, $200,000 for a South branch.

Close vote tallies and missing returns from two precincts offered election night hope that at least one part of the referendum had passed. But the official canvas by the Board of Election Commissioners eventually showed that the referendum had gone down by 21 votes in the North (3,337 to 3,316) and 45 votes (3,335 to 3,290) in the South.

“One of the oddities of the vote was the fact north and south residents apparently were voting against each other,” noted the
local press. South Berwyn residents voted “yes” on the south library question and “no” on the north, while North Berwyn residents reversed the “yeas” and “nays” to favor their area. Neither side of “Berwyn’s Mason–Dixon line” could muster sufficient votes to win.

State Representative George F. Dolezal, a South Berwyn resident, blamed the Democratic Party for the referendum’s defeat, pointing out that both questions carried in the 1st, 2nd, and 8th wards (normally Republican) but were defeated in the heavily Democratic 3rd through 7th wards. The representative said that at his own expense he had circulated flyers recommending a “yes” vote.

Almost immediately following their referendum’s defeat, Library Board members sought legal counsel as to how long they must wait to try again. They were told that decision was up to the City Council.

Polivka Named Director Number Three

Meanwhile, the combined pressure of the referendum and the responsibilities of family life were taking a toll on the library’s director. Although Board members had unanimously agreed their pregnant director should remain in her position “as long as it did not interfere with her work,” Mrs. (Belon) Shaw in a 2007 interview recalled concluding that with one toddler at home and a second child on the way she “would not be able to continue working.”

On February 9, 1959, the Board accepted her letter of resignation, and that same day hired Mrs. Emily R. Polivka as acting head librarian at an annual salary of $4,800.

The new director initially had been employed by the library in the early 1950s as a clerk in the South Branch. By January 1, 1960, the word “acting” had been stricken from her title, and Mrs. Polivka was head librarian.

Library leaders began facing up to the reality of what it might take to pass their building referendum.
On September 15, 1958, the Library Board had firmly declined to omit full basements from its building plans. This was soon followed by the city’s announcement that “due to a lack of time” the library referendum could not be included on the November 4 election ballot.

The Library Board apparently got the message and began to see the wisdom of reducing expenses. In October 1958, the Board eliminated basement bathrooms from construction plans. In November, it agreed that basement walls and ceilings should be unfinished. The cuts continued so that by the time of the 1960 referendum the only finished areas were to be those devoted to necessary heating and ventilating systems. As a result, the bond issue had been reduced from $371,000 to $342,000, an amount the Berwyn Life theorized would be much more “palatable” to voters.

1950s Bestsellers

*From Here to Eternity* • James Jones
*Desiree* • Annemarie Selinko
*Not as a Stranger* • Morton Thompson
*Dr. Zhivago* • Boris Pasternak
*Exodus* • Leon Uris
The Library and its supporters made other changes as well. Unlike the ballot of two years earlier, when each building was posed as a separate question, the 1960 proposal appeared as a single issue. And this time around, the referendum received wide support not only from the new Friends of the Berwyn Library, formed in February 1960, but also from numerous community organizations and individual residents.

“Every PTA, educational association, men’s and women’s civic clubs, taxpayers’ organizations, city administration and political party leader have recommended approval,” noted the Berwyn Life.

The Berwyn Junior Civic League was a primary backer. The League sponsored a showing of library film trailers in four Berwyn movie houses in the weeks before the referendum. On the Saturday prior to the election, the League organized two motorcades to Berwyn shopping centers, with the lead car equipped with a loudspeaker system offering music and announcements promoting the referendum.

Political leaders were outspokenly supportive. “When you realize that these buildings and this most worthwhile program can be financed and accomplished at the cost of approximately two packs of cigarettes a year to each Berwyn resident, it certainly becomes the greatest dollar value ever offered the voters of this city,” said Alderman Frenette.

Mayor Kriz, in a personal appeal, noted, “The cost of this improvement is small when compared to the advantages gained in keeping Berwyn a first rate community by maintaining the city’s high reputation and in preserving property values.” He urged
support “to maintain Berwyn’s reputation as a progressive city and assure continuation of present high cultural standards.”

“There is a direct relation between library facilities and the earning power of a community’s residents,” editorialized the Berwyn Life. “This will be the start to raise the cultural and economic levels of Berwyn.”

“Referendum Wins Easily.” That Berwyn Life newspaper headline announced the 8,016 to 4,627 victory in which only four precincts out of 67 rejected the referendum.

That September, the City Council authorized the sale of $342,000 in bonds to finance the building of the two branch libraries and awarded a construction contract to A. H. Viren and Sons, Inc. of Berwyn. Ground was broken that same month.

“Participating in groundbreaking ceremonies for construction of the South Branch Library at 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue are (kneeling, from left) Robert Viren, architect; Mayor William J. Kriz and Charles Frye, a member of the Berwyn Public Library Board, and (standing) Georgia Nevaril-Lhotka, Board member; Dr. Albert Hall, Board president; Earl Eppsteiner, Board member; Library Director Emily Polivka; Alderman Stanley Bellis; Louis Viren, general contractor, and Board members Rose Oplatka and Roy Albrecht.” (Photo courtesy of Berwyn Life)
The construction was not without obstacles. “When we started to build at 16th Street, we had the worst spring,” recalled Mrs. Rose Oplatka, a member of the Board at that time. “Water kept coming into the excavation at 16th Street, and we had to pull out the heavy equipment and dig by hand.”

While branch construction proceeded, the regular work of the library and its supporters continued.

The newly organized Friends of the Library held its first general meeting in October 1960 with Stuart Brent as guest speaker. So many people signed up to hear the renowned Chicago bookstore owner and radio and television personality that the meeting had to be held at the Morton West High School auditorium. Over the ensuing years, the Friends would present many popular speakers ranging from Dr. Lester Fisher, longtime director of the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, to Floyd Kalber, NBC television newscaster.

New Branch Construction

By August 1961, work on the new South Branch at 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue was far enough along for the library to announce its Windsor Avenue location would close on August 13 so that staff could prepare for the move and be ready to receive patrons by the time school opened.

North Branch occupancy would be delayed “so as not to place too much of a strain on the staff to pack, move, and reopen both buildings at the same time,” Director Polivka told the Berwyn Life. Formal dedication of both branches was to be held several months later.

New buildings meant new expenses. By December, the Library was asking the City Council for a 1962 budget of $88,954, a 30 percent increase in funding over the previous year.

New borrowers had increased from 134 in October 1960 to 302 in October 1961.

To assure adequate staffing to serve this increase in patronage, the Library Board asked for an additional $3,000 for salaries.
Another $4,000 was requested for custodial services to clean the oversize glass windows, large floors and public toilets in the new facilities. To enable the library director to travel between buildings and reach out to the community, the Board sought $2,500 to purchase an auto and $1,000 for fuel to run it.

A new era had begun.

For nearly 70 years, the Berwyn Library had been constantly on the move from one rental location to another. Now service was permanently quartered in two new buildings in North and South Berwyn that had been designed specifically to meet library needs. Together with the Central Branch in City Hall, library service was within easy reach for all residents of Berwyn.

Dream Fulfilled, Dr. Hall Retires

With his construction dreams finally fulfilled, Library Board President Dr. Albert W. Hall decided it was time to retire. He left the Board in 1963 after 30 years of service.

Throughout the 1960s, book purchases and circulation rose in tandem. In 1966, the library budget received a big boost to $90,016 under new Mayor George Dolezal. The librarian’s salary increased by $800, and wages rose for all other employees as well. The 1966 budget also included $350 for the inception of an audio/visual program at the South Branch and $1,500 to create a public meeting room in that branch’s basement. The increase in dollars was reflected in a growth in circulation that same year with the number of borrowers rising by 2,951.

In a story printed in the January 20, 1967, issue of the Berwyn Life, Director Polivka attributed at least some of the increase in circulation to a growing desire by patrons for information on coping with nervous tension and emotional strain.

The widespread tension and anxiety in today’s world has stepped up requests for books addressing fatigue, anxiety, personal insecurity, and “other modern day ills,” Mrs. Polivka said, adding that books on those subjects were requested constantly.

At least one Library Board member was expressing anxiety over more practical matters.
“Will we ever complete the unfinished basements of our two new libraries?” trustee Joseph Zeglin asked in a November 1967 letter printed in the *Berwyn Life*. “Thousands of cubic feet of space lie dormant in these buildings,” the trustee noted. “The community has been deprived of those cultural and educational aspects that should exist. We have lingered long enough.”

In the library’s 1968 budget application to the City Council, Board President John Kotaska further explained the library’s request for $55,000 to complete basement facilities at both branches:

“These areas have been in partial use, but due to safety and health reasons our programs will have to be discontinued,” Mr. Kotaska said. “The very popular children’s movie program will be our first casualty.”

But although the library was able by the end of the year to announce expanded hours for the South Branch (now to be open mornings Monday through Saturday) it would be several years before basement renovations could be completed.

Looking back on those times during a recent interview, former Board Member Mary Toriello particularly remembered problems in the 34th Street Branch basement. “You could not use the basement at all because the door to the boiler room was put on backwards,” she said. Mrs. Toriello recalled teaming up with fellow Board Members Ruth Borch and Harriet Hillary to get the door properly installed and the stairs revamped so the lower level could be used for children’s movies and programs. “It took us awhile, but we got it done,” Mrs. Toriello said, adding it was worth the effort because the 34th Street Branch was so highly valued by area residents. “My neighbors used to go every other day to take out books,” she recalled.

Berwynites of the late 1960s were devoted readers, but their reading tastes were changing.

Library Director Polivka noted that in 1967 adults were reading as many fiction as nonfiction books and selecting more significant literature. She attributed this to “better books made available by publishers, the desire of Americans for self-improvement and interest generated by the media.

“Since more and more people were investing in the stock market, books and periodicals on this subject were in constant
use,” Mrs. Polivka noted in a *Berwyn Life* interview. Interest in judo, yoga, jiu-jitsu, and hypnotism also were on the rise. But light romance and westerns were declining in popularity, “probably due to the availability of this material on television,” she theorized.

Total circulation the previous year for both books and periodicals was 163,687, and Polivka observed growing use of the library by local schools and particularly college students.

In 1968, Berwyn joined the Suburban Library System (SLS). Founded to promote and foster the improvement of public libraries in Cook, DuPage, and Will counties, the system also offered reciprocal borrowing among its members. The Berwyn Library saw it as a way to enable its patrons to access audio/visual materials and special books that were not in the Berwyn collection.

A 1960 referendum finances construction of the South Branch of the Berwyn Public Library, 34th Street and Oak Park Avenue, (pictured above) as well as a mirror-image North Branch at 16th Street and Elmwood Avenue. The South Branch later was sold to MacNeal Hospital. The city-owned North Branch currently houses the Berwyn Senior Center, the 16th Street Theater, and other community services. (*Photo courtesy of Berwyn Life*)

1960s Bestsellers

*Advise and Consent* • Allen Drury  
*The Agony and the Ecstasy* • Irving Stone  
*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* • D. J. M. Cornwell  
*The Valley of the Dolls* • Jacqueline Susann  
*Portnoy’s Complaint* • Phillip Roth
1970s

Space Shuffle

The decade of the 1970s began auspiciously.

The South Branch was remodeled, and the Children’s Department moved to the basement. Thus, additional space was gained not only for children’s materials but for adult collections as well.

A similar remodeling took place a year or two later in the North Branch. Now there was basement space not only for children’s programs and story times but also a hospitality room for senior citizens.

“We would get as many as 60 people coming on Friday afternoons for movies,” Carol Shotola, a retired library administrative assistant, later recalled of those days. “We got movies from Suburban Audio Visual Service, a department of the Suburban Library System. Travelogues, biographies, and musicals were senior favorites. Board President Anton Novak and his wife frequently were among the attendees.”

In September 1971, the library initiated a series of “cultural and informative programs” with Floyd Kalber, NBC-TV newscaster and television personality, as the kick-off speaker. Another program expansion came in January 1972 with the introduction of family night films.

However, the additional programming strained library facilities. Mrs. Shotola recalled that to meet the growing interest in children’s books and activities the children’s librarian moved to the 16th Street basement from the first-floor circulation desk. Additional space was diverted to use as a periodical room.

Money was also tight, and as an economy measure the Library Board suggested closing the Central Branch in City Hall which had
fallen into disrepair. In response, Mayor Emil Vacin and members of the City Council in June 1972 vowed to appropriate sufficient funds to renovate the City Hall branch.

Owen Naccarato, a junior at Western Illinois University, and Terry Lasky, a senior at Morton West High School in Berwyn find the library’s 34th Street Branch a busy place to study in January 1970. (Photo courtesy of Berwyn Life)

**City-Library in Second Dispute**

Another in the series of disputes between the Library Board and the city of Berwyn began April 9, 1973, when the Board by a 5–3 vote fired the library director. Lining up with the majority were Board President Kotaska, Vice President Oplatka, Financial Secretary Ted Palter, and Members Frank Juranek and Joseph Tranauskas. Voting against were Members Bernadette Gorman, Georgia Nevaril (later Lhotka)*, and Novak. Member Florence Zukowski apparently was absent from the meeting.

In a 2005 interview, Mrs. Oplatka recalled that Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka “marched to City Hall with Mrs. Polivka” and lobbied to get her job back. Apparently the two women, friends since high school, mounted a persuasive argument. Mayor Emil Vacin reinstated Director Polivka and instructed her to return to work the following day.

The confrontation widened.

The Library Board explained its action in a statement printed in the *Berwyn Life* on April 15, 1973. The statement noted that the Board had adopted a plan calling for compliance with the

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Georgia Nevaril later married Ed Lhotka and hereafter will be referred to as Nevaril-Lhotka.*
minimum standards for Illinois libraries and specifically targeting a 5 percent increase in book circulation. Instead, circulation declined from 208,000 in 1963 to 150,000 in 1972.

The Board also had called for installation of book depositories at all three branches, an increase in children’s programs and adult movies, promotion of a library book amnesty and open house, and the encouragement of congenial relations between the library staff and patrons.

Instead, the Board maintained, “Mrs. Polivka appeared to be of the opinion that the services of the library were adequate. This, coupled with unaccountability of funds received, some monies spent and library-budgeted funds unspent, contributed to the [Board’s dismissal] action.”

In a rebuttal printed in the same issue, Director Polivka said that, in her view, “Standards must be based on population served, taxable property, size of area served, and other criteria. It is desirable to have a lot of money appropriated for the library, but it must be realistic.”

As to circulation, Mrs. Polivka noted that 11 out of 20 libraries in the western suburbs had experienced a decrease in circulation, which she attributed to “competition with exterior media.” She disputed statistics supplied by the Library Board and noted that March circulation was up 8.5 percent over the previous year.

As to installing three book depositories, Mrs. Polivka said they would cost $1,200 and the Berwyn Fire Department had advised against them.

The desired library open house had just been held, the Director noted. As to programming, she listed an average attendance of 52 at preschool movies, 45 at children’s movies, and 55 at those for adults. She said the library lacked space to seat more.

Regarding financial matters, Mrs. Polivka said library expenditures and revenues “are open to inspection and periodically audited.”

Looking back on the controversy decades later, Mrs. Oplatka recalled, “There were certain men on the Board who were officials in their companies, and they made rulings as to what Mrs. Polivka was to carry out. She did not do it.”
Oplatka said she cautioned Polivka, “When these men make rulings they expect them to be carried out.’ But Mrs. Polivka said she ‘knew what was good for the library.’"

In the following issue of the *Berwyn Life*, Board President Kotaska took issue with Mayor Vacin’s decision to reinstate Director Polivka, as well as with Mrs. Polivka herself. In a letter to the editor, Mr. Kotaska wrote:

> The mayor, without hearing all the facts, returned the librarian to her job. Under Illinois statutes, the Board has the authority to appoint and remove the librarian. . . . The decision made by the Board was legal and cannot be changed by any city official. . . . To adopt the premise the people of Berwyn are not interested in their libraries and that they are getting good services is not true. The cliché “we always did it this way for the past 19 years” is not valid.

> Therefore, with all due respect, we ask that the mayor reconsider his action and acknowledge that the Board did act within the law. [Otherwise] the Board feels it must take legal action.

As to Director Polivka’s statements to the press, Mr. Kotaska insisted Berwyn’s circulation figures did not compare favorably with those of other suburbs. He noted that, according to Suburban Library System figures, the Berwyn Library circulated an average of three books per resident, whereas Downers Grove circulated 11 per person and LaGrange, 16.5.

Recalling that, in May of the previous year, the Board had asked Mrs. Polivka to send questionnaires to people not using the library to determine their reasons for nonuse, Mr. Kotaska noted, “It was never done.”

He cited a Suburban Library System study that concluded the Berwyn Library contained “too many old and worn titles; the collection of nonfiction books for children lacks depth; one branch of the library should be designated as the main branch; and the library’s system of cataloging needs modernization.”

As to finances, Mr. Kotaska noted that a year earlier the Board had instructed Mrs. Polivka to inform Board members of the procedures used for handling revenues from fines. “The librarian has not replied.”
Similarly, the Board president said, Mrs. Polivka failed to comply with the Board’s January 8 request for the director to supply weekly employee time sheets for Board approval.

Board Seeks Closure

President Kotaska listed two main issues the Board felt must be corrected:

1. “The concept of one library must prevail. The maintaining of three separate libraries—as was the policy—must come to an end.”
2. “The employees must be given the opportunity to participate and contribute to the best of their abilities. . . . Compensation should reflect their efforts.”

Years later former City Clerk and Alderman Donald Pechous, who at that time chaired the City Council’s Library Oversight Committee, recalled Board members’ desire to close the Central Branch of the library as the crux of the conflict between Board and director.

However, Mrs. Oplatka later identified employee benefits as the major issue. “The men on the Board wanted to provide more coverage for employees,” she noted.

Apparently, Director Polivka had not even informed employees of benefits to which they already were entitled. One former library staff member recalled she had worked for the library for more than six months before she found out through a conversation with employees in other city departments that she automatically had been afforded medical insurance coverage 30 days after she had begun working for the library. Not only had she never received a medical insurance card, but she had never even received the application forms to get one, even though they had been sent to her from City Hall in care of the director. Further, she never had been given a list of paid holidays and was totally unaware she was entitled to five days of annual sick leave.
“We did not know anything we were entitled to,” the former employee said, “and we complained to the Board.”

The same February 8 letter in which the employees complained to Library Board members about the director’s handling of employee benefits also took issue with the Board itself. The letter signed by 12 staff members expressed concerns about “the interference in internal management by a Board member and the questioning and harassing of staff members during their working day. . . . According to the American Library Association, it is a violation of standards for a Board member to meddle in internal management or harass employees. We zealously agree.”

Nevertheless, the benefit issue was reinforced at an April 18, 1973, public meeting called to explore the issues by Alderman Pechous, chairman of the City Council’s Library Oversight Committee.

At that meeting, Miss Gail Gjondia (later Lofgren,)* a full-time Library employee for seven months, said it was only within the previous week that she had received forms to apply for hospitalization insurance that she apparently had been eligible to receive after 30 days of employment. As quoted in a *Berwyn Life* report on the meeting, Miss Gjondia said she “was told to back date [the form] to October 1972.”

Also according to the *Berwyn Life*, Miss Gjondia said Mrs. Polivka “told the staff almost daily that the Library Board was planning to phase out the head librarian and other members of the staff, and if they wanted to save their jobs they should support Mrs. Polivka.”

Board members also spoke out at that meeting about employee intimidation.

Mr. Juranek said employees had been asked to sign a petition saying they “backed Mrs. Polivka 100 percent.”

“We have a gifted and creative staff,” Vice President Oplatka told the audience. “They are underpaid. They were threatened with the loss of their jobs and told the Board was dissatisfied with them by the librarian. Some fear they will be terminated after tonight’s

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Gail Gjondia later married Thomas Lofgren, and in 1993 she was named Director of the Berwyn Public Library. In upcoming sections, she will be referred to as Lofgren.*
meeting.”

Mrs. Oplatka said Mrs. Polivka had “failed to implement progressive programs endorsed by the board and turned back to the city $7,000 budgeted to the library for staff salaries while the library remains understaffed.”

The Berwyn Life report went on to note that a spokesman for the Friends of the Library weighed in on the director’s side, stating that, although the Berwyn Library was below the new minimum national standards, “so are most of the libraries in the country.”

Board members who had voted against Polivka’s firing spoke out as well.

Mrs. Gorman objected to the firing as “a real railroad job.”

Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka said she had “begged the board to allow Mrs. Polivka to defend herself the night she was fired but was unsuccessful.”

Mr. Novak suggested the Library Board’s action was “in violation of acceptable parliamentary procedures” since the dismissal had taken place in closed rather than open session.

President Kotaska insisted no violation had occurred. Nevertheless, to allay any doubts, Mr. Juranek told those assembled that the Board would meet to re-fire Director Polivka at a special meeting the following Monday.

“We’ll have another meeting,” Mr. Juranek said. “An open vote will be taken. . . . We’ll obey every parliamentary rule.”

Immediately following the meeting, Mr. Juranek wrote to Mayor Vacin and the City Council, insisting the Library Board had “acted in good faith and within the requirements of the law.”

Mr. Juranek cited a legal opinion rendered in 1971 by then City Attorney Walter Wellman: “Quoting Section 4–7 of the Illinois Revised Statutes, the Board has the power ‘to appoint a competent librarian and necessary assistants, to fix their compensation, to retain professional consultants as needed.’ If one does not agree with this statute, his recourse is through the courts and not by the action of any city official or library committee appointed at a city council meeting.”

Accordingly, Mr. Juranek wrote:

We are asking the city attorney [Thomas Hett] to initiate a quo warranto suit on behalf of the citizens of Berwyn to:
1. Determine what right the mayor or any other city official has [sic] to usurp the decisions of the autonomous Library Board.

2. Determine the basis . . . the city comptroller has in paying an employee who has been terminated by the Library Board.

3. Recover the salary plus interest of the employee who was paid but legally terminated.

We wish the Library Board’s actions to be respected without political or any other interference as long as they are acting within the Revised Library Statutes. The decision of your Library Board was not based upon emotion but facts generated over an extended period of a year and a half. Our government is a Democracy not a Dictatorship. People may not agree with majority rule, but this is the basis upon which our country was founded.

Other reactions to the April 18 meeting also were reported in the *Berwyn Life*.

Alderman Raymond Cox said he did not feel Mrs. Polivka should have been fired, but the decision had been made by the Library Board and was outside the authority of the City Council. However, Alderman Pechous said he would ask the city attorney for an opinion on the authority of the Library Board.

Speaking out in her own defense in a statement published in the newspaper, Director Polivka outlined progress on a five-year plan she said had been submitted to the Library Board in January. The long-range plan included recommendations for expansion of services in almost every department of the library, to be made possible by additions to the building. A second-floor addition was proposed for the South Branch “covering the east half of the building” and a second addition with space for two offices. The North Branch would expand young adult and children’s services by shifting materials into the mezzanine and basement. Central Branch alterations would involve replacing and repositioning shelving to create more space and stem the seepage, and then redecorating the children’s room.

However, the controversy already had moved beyond legal opinions and long-range planning.
“Mayor ‘Fires’ Board President”

That was the newspaper headline over the story announcing that, two days before the special meeting scheduled to re-fire Director Polivka, Mayor Vacin had “fired” President Kotaska instead.

In a letter delivered to Mr. Kotaska on Saturday, April 20, the mayor said he was dismissing Kotaska as president and member of the Library Board effective the following day.

Mayor Vacin described his action as being “in the best interests of the citizens of the City of Berwyn and for the more harmonious operation of the library system”:

I have on several occasions discussed with you what I consider very obvious deficiencies in your administration of the Library Board. But after Wednesday’s City Council Library Committee meeting where you adamantly refused to alter your path, I realized my current action was necessary and appropriate.

In your handling of the abortive firing of the head librarian, you have in one stroke brought embarrassment and ridicule to the city and library system and have failed to accomplish your intended purpose. Furthermore, you attempted to fire a long-time, faithful public servant without the courtesy of formal charges, a hearing, or any opportunity to defend against the accusations. And in doing your deed you violated the rules governing the conduct of public meetings.

The act dealing with open meetings requires that all actions of public bodies be conducted in the open and not in secret. From the information I have received, you attempted to fire Emily Polivka in an executive session and never did return to an open, public meeting to move for her dismissal, receive a second and have an open public vote.

I have asked for your resignation so that I could spare you public embarrassment, but you have refused my offer. I am therefore forced to make your removal and the reasons a matter of public record. Please turn over all property of the city and any official records of the Library Board to the [City] Comptroller as soon as possible.
In defiance of the letter, Mr. Kotaska showed up the following night to preside over the special meeting of the Library Board.

At the request of Board Member Nevaril-Lhotka, City Attorney Thomas Hett showed up as well. The *Berwyn Life* reported this exchange:

The attorney said that in his opinion Mr. Kotaska’s participation in the meeting was illegal and cautioned, “Anything you do here may be a complete nullity.”

Mr. Kotaska said he was in possession of a legal opinion which said a Board member could only be removed “for cause,” which meant malfeasance in office. Attorney Hett said it was up to the mayor to determine cause.

Mr. Kotaska said it would be up to the courts to decide whether the mayor had legally removed him.

Two votes were taken at the meeting—one to again terminate Director Polivka and the other to reimburse Vice President Oplatka for any legal costs encountered in defending the decisions reached by the Board.

The Board split 4–4 on each vote with Members Juranek, Oplatka, Palter, and Tranauskas supporting the motions and Members Nevaril-Lhotka, Gorman, Novak, and Zukowski, who had been absent from the fateful April 9 meeting, voting in opposition. Mr. Kotaska cast the deciding vote to achieve a 5–4 margin to terminate Mrs. Polivka.

On the advice of City Attorney Hett, Mrs. Polivka’s supporters then walked out of the meeting.

“As far as I’m concerned, no legal meeting took place here tonight,” the city attorney told the *Berwyn Life* reporter.

The following day, the mayor advised the City Council by letter that he had removed Mr. Kotaska from the Board and promised to present his reasons at the next Council meeting.

In a parallel communication, also dated April 23, City Attorney Hett presented the legal opinion Alderman Pechous had requested:

> Illinois statutes give the mayor the power to remove an appointee providing the City Council is duly informed of the action and does not overrule the mayor with a two-thirds vote.
Within the area of their statutory responsibility, the Library Board is autonomous. However, the corporate authorities of the city determine the amount to be appropriated for library purposes and in this way can effectively “usurp” decisions of the Board. . . . Moreover, any public official can call attention to deficiencies in the operation of the Library Board and can initiate actions to protect the city from suit when the Board acts illegally.

Section 407 of the State Statutes (Chapter 81, Ill. Revised Statutes) clearly gives the Board the power to hire and fire. Just as clearly, Section 41 of Chapter 102, commonly known as the Open Meetings Act . . . demands that all formal actions of the Library Board be open and public.

I have been informed that Mrs. Polivka was . . . dismissed after a secret vote had been taken in . . . closed session. No action was thereafter taken, in an open, public meeting whereby Mrs. Polivka’s dismissal was moved, seconded and publicly voted upon. Hence, the decision reached at the closed session did not achieve finality and Mrs. Polivka’s dismissal did not take effect. . . . The mayor properly advised Mrs. Polivka and the city comptroller that Mrs. Polivka was still a city employee entitled to her pay. That the Library Board’s action on April 9 was ineffective is most clearly acknowledged by Mr. Juranek, who stated in a recent newspaper article that the Board would have to reconvene to properly vote to dismiss Mrs. Polivka.

As to Mr. Juranek’s request to file quo warranto proceedings, City Attorney Hett wrote, “Mr. Juranek cannot speak for the Board unless he has put the question to them, and I know of no meeting of the Library Board since April 9 where he could get authority from the Board to make the requests.”

Noting the City Council’s Library Committee “has come under attack in the press for seeking to learn the facts surrounding the abortive firing of Mrs. Polivka,” Attorney Hett said, “This committee has the responsibility of reporting to the Council as to the method of spending appropriated funds. . . . [It] had a legitimate purpose to hold a public meeting to discuss the firing in order to determine if funding, spending, or lack thereof was in any way involved.”

In response, the Library Board faction favoring Mrs. Polivka’s firing attempted to mediate the conflict through the City Council.
They proposed that an outside panel of experts evaluate the library and the relationship of the Library Board to the City Council. But the Council’s Library Oversight Committee by a 2–1 vote referred the matter back to the Library Board, noting the committee had “not been called in at the beginning . . . and it’s too late now [to intervene].”

The City Council concurred in the committee’s recommendation and also in the mayor’s appointment of Mrs. Blanche Kekish to replace Mr. Palter, who had been described by the Berwyn Life as “one of the board members most critical of Mrs. Polivka.” The replacement assured the Library Board now contained a majority in favor of Director Polivka.

Mr. John Juergensmeyer, attorney for Mrs. Polivka’s opponents, urged city officials to avoid “expensive” litigation. However, Alderman Pechous maintained Mr. Kotaska and his supporters had “rejected every attempt at reconciliation,” and Mayor Vacin said he would “not allow the board to be used as a pawn in an individual vendetta.”

In response, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of the four dissidents by Juergensmeyer and Zimmerman Law Offices of Elgin and Chicago. It contended the City Council had violated state statutes in its handling of library funds, in replacing Mr. Palter before his term ended and in removing Mr. Kotaska without a “formal charge.”

The suit further contended the city had not given proper accounting of library funds to the Library Board; okayed library bills without Board approval; paid Mrs. Polivka’s salary after the Board had voted to fire her; and had reduced the tax levy requested by the Board.

The suit received financial as well as moral support from professional library organizations.

According to a story in the May 16, 1973, Berwyn Life, the Illinois Library Association (ILA) appropriated $1,000 “to support John Kotaska . . . in his legal fight to determine the validity in his action in firing Mrs. Emily Polivka.” Two ILA members, the Illinois Library Directors Association and the Illinois Library System, together mustered another $1,000 for the cause.

“We are not going to get into the political issues involved here,” Directors Association President Matthew Witczak told the
Berwyn Life. “But the directors felt Mr. Kotaska and his board took the correct action because they have the legal right to hire and fire library personnel.”

**Dispute Resolved Out of Court**

Despite widespread support, the matter was settled out of court. According to Berwyn Life newspaper accounts, it was agreed the city comptroller and library director would make a full accounting of all library funds to the Board and that the Board must approve all bills for payment.

It further was stipulated that Mrs. Polivka must be retained as director “for a reasonable time” and that “the Library Board has control over the hiring and firing of library personnel.”

Per the agreement, Mr. Kotaska was returned to the Board as a member, but not as president, and his “reappointment” was only for the duration of his term, which would expire April 1 of the following year. Mr. Palter was not returned and Mrs. Kekish’s appointment stood, thus shifting the balance of power to Director Polivka’s supporters.

To avoid what Attorney Hett called “the confusion of the past,” the terms of all future board members were to end on June 30, not scattered throughout the year.

Both sides saw pluses in the compromise.

Mr. Hett said the accord “upholds the mayor’s power to remove a Board member” since it called for Mr. Kotaska’s “reappointment” (not reinstatement).

Mr. Kotaska insisted the key element in the compromise over the mayor’s power to dismiss a Board member was the stipulation that the action must be a “removal for cause.” He also counted it as a plus that “it is now a matter of court record that the Library Board has the power to hire and fire and has complete control over finances.”

At the first meeting of the reconstituted Board, Acting President Oplatka was able to muster unanimous support for a request that Director Polivka supply the Board with personnel records so that a Board policy on personnel could be formulated.
And Mrs. Oplatka earned compliments from Board Member Gorman, one of the director’s supporters, for “doing a good job in keeping the [first] meeting away from quarreling and running it fairly.”

New Board officers were elected in September 1973, and with Mr. Novak as president; Mrs. Kekish as vice president; and new appointee Mrs. Ann Hassler as secretary, the Berwyn Life noted, “The last fragments of power wielded by the old majority were erased.”

Mr. Kotaska did not go quietly. He continued to take issue with the Board, questioning items ranging from bid procedures to the accuracy of circulation figures. He held up payment of May and June bills, charging that Director Polivka had not supplied sufficient documentation.

In July, Mrs. Polivka and her supporters again appealed to the City Council’s aldermanic oversight committee for help. In disgust, Alderman Pechous resigned the committee chairmanship. “The City Council was sued, an accord was reached, but it has not been honored,” the alderman told the Council. “In my opinion the Library Board is violating its own bylaws. I have decided to resign as chairman.”

“The City Council should keep hands off library policy,” insisted Mr. Kotaska. “We went to court to prove the library budget is independent of the city’s.”

Countered Hett, “Nothing in the court-ordered settlement indicated the city can’t make changes in the library budget.”

**Board Gets Back to Business**

Library Board members were tiring of the fray. They wanted to focus on what the Berwyn Life described as “a backlog of problems caused by five months of litigation and Board recess”—faltering air conditioning at the Central Branch, moisture collecting on the east wall and inadequate shelving in the juvenile room at the South Branch, and the need for blacktopping the parking lots at both locations.
The Board decided to handle the situation by barring Member Kotaska from any committee assignments. When Mr. Kotaska’s term was up in April 1974, the mayor replaced him with Mr. Anton Jurcik. By 1975, only Members Novak, Kekish, Gorman, and Nevaril-Lhotka remained from the original Board involved in the controversy.

Years later, looking back on that super-heated era, Mrs. Oplatka took satisfaction in her part in history, saying, “I did fight for the things I thought the people should have.”

Retired Alderman Pechous said he thought one of the key issues was that “Director Polivka was not buying books. She was turning back to the city the money she did not spend.”

The former alderman and city clerk also recalled that a Board faction led by Mr. Kotaska was concerned about the decline in circulation and thought one way to address it would be to close the Central Branch in City Hall.

“By that time, most of the public schools had their own libraries,” Mr. Pechous recalled, “and Board members were saying, ‘Why do we need three branches?’” The closing was staved off, Mr. Pechous recalled, by an impassioned speech by a sister from St. Odilo who successfully pleaded, “We need the Central Library.”

A perspective on the embattled library director herself was offered by Mrs. Gail Lofgren, who recalled that at age 17 she had been hired by Mrs. Polivka to work as a page at the library, an experience that inspired her career goals and eventually led to her own employment as Berwyn library director in 1993. Interviewed following Mrs. Polivka’s death in 2000, former Director Lofgren offered a different view of the controversial predecessor who climbed up on library rooftops with a tar bucket to repair leaks and was willing to give a teenager a chance at employment. She recalled Mrs. Polivka as “an extremely dedicated person . . . very organized. Everything in the library had to be in order, and I’ve never seen such straight shelves in my life.”

Apparently lost sight of in those combative early 1970s was an important evaluation of the Berwyn Library undertaken by Beverly Yacko, book collection consultant for the Suburban Library System.
In his letter to the editor defending the Board’s dismissal of Director Polivka, Mr. Kotaska had referred to the library weaknesses uncovered in the Yacko study. In her report dated April 2, 1973, the consultant had noted:

“The Berwyn Library is unique in the Suburban Library System because it has three branches.” But although she found the North and South Branches provided a welcoming setting for patron study and relaxation, Consultant Yacko described the Central Branch as “not very inviting.”

“Housed in the basement of City Hall, it has books on all walls and narrow aisles, giving the room a very crowded appearance. Unless there is very heavy circulation and use of the materials in this branch, it should be disbanded,” the consultant concluded.

Branches “Below Standard”

The South Branch, which was open 62½ hours per week, was six hours below national library standards, Yacko noted. The North and Central Branches fell even further below, at 41½ and 34 hours per week, respectively.

“A first priority for the Library Board should be to raise the tax rate for library services,” Yacko urged. “A library in a community of 50,000 people should have a budget of $257,250, or $4.90 per capita. The book budget should be 17 percent of the total budget, or $43,700. The annual report for Berwyn indicates an operating budget of $145,900 and a book budget of $30,865. The total book collection is 71,972, far below the 3.5 per capita, or 175,000, suggested by standards.

“Because the diffusion of book funds is a detriment to a strong collection, one branch should be designated the main library and the materials housed there should be greatly strengthened and broadened,” she concluded. “Only the most popular titles need to be held in duplicate either at the branches or in the main library.”

Yacko suggested increasing the main library hours to a minimum of 68 per week. She urged a thorough weeding of the collection and suggested a commercial cataloging service be employed. “The present cataloging takes much of the librarian’s
time,” she said, “time which should be expended on administration and public service.”

The Yacko report went unheeded. The Library Board appeared most desirous of a return to normalcy, and the staff was focused on changes taking place in patron interests and in new technologies that promised to alter the format of library services throughout the country.

Not even on the radar screen at that time, an event was taking place at Harlem Avenue and Riverside Drive that would prove vitally important to the future of the Berwyn Public Library. On November 30, 1974, a ribbon-cutting was held at 2701 S. Harlem Avenue for the new corporate office of the Czechoslovak Society of America. Some 20 years later, city and library officials would be negotiating to buy that building as a new home for a centralized Berwyn Public Library.

By the mid-1970s, patron interest in reading was on the rise, but tastes in literature were changing.

Director Polivka reported in a *Berwyn Life* interview that, between 1974 and 1975, readership had increased “substantially.” The Berwyn Library now had 86,964 books and 34,408 periodicals. Adult fiction circulation rose to 62,626 and adult nonfiction to 45,171. Children read 20,096 nonfiction and 39,787 fiction books, and the recording collection also proved quite popular with a circulation of 5,618.

Children’s programming for 1975 added movies to the traditional story times.

America’s approaching Bicentennial celebration sparked increased requests for children’s history materials. Help also was sought for science projects, with chemistry experiments the apparent favorite. Fairy tales enjoyed renewed circulation. Books by Beatrix Potter and Dr. Seuss were most popular.

However, by the end of the 1970s, libraries were noting big changes in the services they were being asked to provide in what was described as “a new era—the Information Age.”

In November 1979, President Jimmy Carter convened a White House Conference on Library and Information Services. Conferees explored whether libraries should continue their relatively passive role of storing and providing materials or take a more aggressive approach by serving as community information centers and
teaching people to read. Library representatives got a taste of things to come—computers set up to tap into 100 data banks that would enable patrons to shop the country for best buys, research median incomes across the nation or call up information on bills being considered by the U.S. Congress. Delegates endorsed a National Library Act to set up priorities for libraries throughout the country.

1970s Bestsellers

*Love Story* • Erich Segal

*The Winds of War* • Herman Wouk

*Jonathan Livingston Seagull* • Richard Bach

*Watership Down* • Richard Adams

*Centennial* • James Michener
Board’s Bright Hopes Dim

The decade of the 1980s opened with a Berwyn Library Board full of bright hopes for improved services, especially at the Central Branch in City Hall.

The Suburban Library System’s Yacko study was followed by a second SLS study, summarized at the January 1981 meeting of the Berwyn Library Board. The report suggested three alternative uses for the Central Branch as a:

- Combination popular library and reading room including best sellers, fiction and popular nonfiction paperback editions, basic references, records and cassettes, and a copy machine;
- Special service or special collections branch geared to senior citizens or in-depth reference materials pertaining to business law and government; or
- Programming center for meetings, displays, adult education and audio/visuals.

To make the branch more attractive, SLS suggested brighter paint and carpeting and more colorful displays. To make it more useful, the report proposed adding a community bulletin board and interfiling the card catalog.

SLS also suggested a survey to determine who used the central facility and an analysis comparing cost per circulation with other libraries.

As reported in the local newspaper, the report sparked debate among Board and staff at that January meeting.
Board President Florence Summers expressed concern about the lack of new book orders to supplement the scantily stocked shelves at the Central Branch.

Fellow Board Member Nevaril-Lhotka argued it was “useless to make purchases because nobody is coming here. This [branch] is going to be closed, no matter what.”

“As long as this branch is open,” countered President Summers, “it should service the patrons.”

Although Director Polivka previously had told the Board that few patrons used the Central Branch, she now speculated the shelves were bare “because the books were constantly being borrowed.”

After further study, the Board rejected proposals for alternative uses but favored surveying Central Branch patrons and improving the facility.

“If we upgrade this library [and make] it more attractive, that would be a good start,” said President Summers. Support was voiced for the addition of hanging plants, local art exhibits and the purchase of brightly patterned rugs and small stack chairs for the children’s section. The paperback book rack would be relocated to encourage browsing.

The Board president suggested a large oak table and pull-up chairs for newspaper readers. Miss Summers also suggested the library purchase records and tapes, saying, “The modern mode of living today is with tapes and cassettes.”

But Frank Flaska, a resident in attendance at the meeting, told the Board the branch’s greatest shortcoming was its hours—2:30 to 6 P.M. weekdays and 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. Saturdays.

Perhaps even more important, according to the Berwyn Life, was the cautionary note sounded by Board Member Christine Brom—“We could do something if we had the money.”

By the February Board meeting, the results of a patron survey were in hand. They showed participants lauding the North and South branches but criticizing the Central Branch for “too short hours” and “too few” or “too outdated” books. Nevertheless, survey participants favored retaining the three-branch system rather than closing a branch or building a new central library.
Who Controls Purse Strings?

Finances were the main obstacle to improvements. Even a proposal for a two-month trial rental of a copy machine for $50 per month proved controversial, according to the *Berwyn Life*.

When Director Polivka warned that the rental would have to be approved by City Comptroller Paul Los, President Summers asked, “What’s the hang-up? What have we got a Board for? He’s not running the library. Why does anybody have to ask him for anything?”

That perspective was affirmed from a somewhat different perspective by Board Member Ferdinand Kerbs.

“I don’t think we’re getting enough help from within [City Hall],” Mr. Kerbs said. “When city officials wanted us to come down 10 percent, we cut the budget. But when you ask for information, they say they’ll get it and you don’t hear from them. Why doesn’t the comptroller come down and talk to us and tell us they want to cut back?”

Mr. Kerbs then acted on his frustration. Citing a “lack of cooperation from City Hall,” he resigned from the Board. In accepting his resignation, President Summers also expressed dissatisfaction with “the lack of interest in library affairs from City Hall.”

The following month, the controversy escalated. The Board voted to spend $770 for carpeting in the Central Branch and asked Director Polivka to offer Sunday movies.

When the director said it “couldn’t be done for lack of staff,” the *Berwyn Life* reported the Board suggested offering movies on a week night “so working persons could enjoy them.” However, Mrs. Polivka maintained that “people go home, eat dinner, watch television, and don’t want to go out.”

The exchange became acrimonious.

“You people [the Board] visit these so-called high class libraries with big staffs,” Director Polivka said. “We’re going along with a small staff.”

“You are too budget conscious,” President Summers responded. “The money is there to serve the people of Berwyn.”
“If we only had enough money to go to Goldblatt’s for shoes, you don’t go to Florsheim,” Mrs. Polivka insisted. “I am spending the taxpayers’ money, and I am doing the best I can.”

“The people are complaining,” Member Gorman noted. “How could we have a good library if we don’t have the money?”

The Board decided to ask for a meeting with Comptroller Los to discuss who controls library finances.

“Either Mr. Los has to quit running the Board or the Board is going to quit,” President Summers said ominously.

The financial controversy escalated when the comptroller would not approve the copy machine rental.

Comptroller Los shared his views on the situation with a Berwyn Life reporter:

“Figures show the copy machine rental would be a losing proposition,” the comptroller said. “The girls are enthusiastic, but . . . my job is to watch the finances.

“Berwyn, like other municipalities, is in a bind for cash. Anything that can wait, I advise them to wait. Miss Summers is under the concept that if, at the year’s end, there is money left over, spend it. The money we expected is not coming in or is coming in later.”

Nevertheless, after meeting with the Board, Comptroller Los changed his mind and allowed the copy machine rental to proceed. However, the problems with City Hall continued to multiply.

The Berwyn Life theorized that any resolution was unlikely until after a new administration took over following the April election. City Attorney Hett had been elected mayor in 1977 but vacated his office early to accept appointment as a judge. Mr. John Naughton accepted the title of Acting Mayor in 1980 but expressed reluctance to take any action concerning the Library Board. The newspaper attributed that reluctance to the temporary nature of his position.

April proved too far away to head off the crisis.

At a mid-March hearing on the city budget, the library was “the only department to feel the city’s ax,” the Berwyn Life reported.

1. The former Goldblatt’s Department Store in Chicago was known for its bargain basement prices for shoes and other items. Florsheim, a Chicago shoe manufacturer and retailer, advertised its products as “shoes of exceptional quality.”
According to Alderman Lawrence Menchetti, a member of the library’s aldermanic oversight committee, the cut was made because the library had cash left over from the previous year. President Summers called such reasoning “ludicrous.”

“They tell us to cut expenditures,” Miss Summers noted. “Now we are being penalized for not spending.”

And so, the banner headline in the March 25 issue of the newspaper read:

“Library Board Members Quit”

President Summers and Members Christine Brom, Bernadette Gorman, and Dorothy Ondracek all resigned in protest.

Summers cited a lack of support from the mayor and City Council for the Board’s efforts to upgrade the Central Branch. “This is a squeeze play,” she told the Berwyn Life.

“They cut the most important thing—the books,” said Mrs. Gorman. “They really want the Central Branch down, and that’s why they’re doing that.”

“It’s obvious the city doesn’t care about the library,” added Member Brom.

The resignations left only three members on what was by state law intended to be a nine-member Library Board—Ann Hassler, Georgia Nevaril-Lhotka, and Josephine Lhotka, a relative of Nevaril-Lhotka’s through marriage.

Comptroller Los insisted the library was not being picked on and that other cuts in city services, such as tree removal and sidewalk repair, also were being considered.

“Closing the Central Branch . . . would only save $40,000 to $50,000 per year,” the comptroller noted, “a small amount in [the city’s] more than $1 million deficit.”

Nevertheless, the Central Branch would indeed close, “temporarily” it was hoped, on January 1 of the following year.

Unable to attain a quorum, the Library Board did not meet from March until June, when newly elected Mayor Joseph Lanzillotti appointed new Board Members Margaret Ritchie and Anthony Scarcello. According to the Berwyn Life, day-to-day
library operations were left to the head librarian not only for those 3½ months but on into September as the Board took its usual summer recess.

The new Board members came into a library in trouble.

According to statistics compiled by the Illinois State Library in Springfield and reported in the *Berwyn Life*, other Illinois communities with populations similar to that of Berwyn provided more patron services, books, periodicals, films, recordings, and money.

“One reason why Berwyn lags behind other communities may be lack of cash,” the newspaper noted. “Of the surrounding communities, the Berwyn Library has the lowest tax rate—.05 cents per $100 of assessed valuation.”

That low rate meant Berwyn was unable to qualify for a state per capita grant, which required a rate of .13. The Suburban Library System reported that, of its 78 member libraries, Berwyn was one of only 18 that failed to qualify for grants the previous year. The Berwyn Library could have received as much as $17,000, SLS noted.

As a result of the cutbacks, Berwyn residents increasingly turned to other communities for library services. The Oak Park Library reported that most nonresidents using its services were from Berwyn. The situation was particularly acute in periodicals. With only 79 periodical titles on its shelves, the Berwyn Library ranked dead last in the western suburbs. Consequently, Berwyn residents borrowed more than 400 periodicals in one month alone from the Oak Park facility.

By August the Library had a new problem—Director Polivka announced plans to resign. The Board accepted her resignation and then voted to retain her as a consultant for 12 hours a week at $12 per hour, effective September 1 and lasting until her successor was hired.

By the end of September, the Board had selected Judith Wester as Mrs. Polivka’s replacement, pending approval by the mayor and City Council. A high school librarian in New Mexico and former employee of libraries in Wilmette and Winnetka, she already had moved to Berwyn and was planning to resume work toward a master’s degree in library science at Rosary College.

It was not to be.
By her December 1 starting date, city approval was still pending. Mayor Joseph Lanzillotti was expressing doubts about the city’s ability to afford Miss Wester’s salary, even though it reportedly was less than the $17,040 Mrs. Polivka had been receiving as director.

Faced with city finances that had deteriorated from a $3.2 million surplus in 1979 to a $400,000 deficit in 1981, Berwyn officials proposed a citywide 1982 budget that eliminated 15 jobs and called for all employees, including police and firefighters, to forgo salary increases. In addition, elected officials were asked to return their salaries to the city.

On December 30, 1981, the Library Board wrote to Miss Wester, informing her that, “due to circumstances beyond our control, the position offered to you on November 9 with the approval of the mayor and City Council is not available. The city budget was passed on December 28, and the position of head librarian at $14,000 was not included.”

Central Branch Closes

Along with cuts in such city services as tree planting and trimming, the Central Branch of the Library, characterized by city officials as “chronically underused and poorly stocked,” was closed.

In one small victory, the library secured an increase in the book budget from $2,000 to $5,000. However, faced with a 1982 library budget half the size of the previous year, the Library Board had little choice but to comply with the city’s requests. The Board reinstated Mrs. Polivka as part-time director at a salary of $7,500. The combined salaries of other employees were to be cut by $30,069 and two part-time employees were to be eliminated.

The Central Branch closed on January 1, 1982. North Branch hours were reduced to 15 hours per week on Monday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons and the South Branch to 24 hours per week Monday through Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings.

Like the city, the Library Board voted to supplement income by raising fees. Duplicate library cards would increase from 50¢
to $1; adult overdue fines from 5 to 10¢ per day; and a book overdue for more than one month from $1.69 to $2.50.

Still on the chopping block, according to the proposed city budget, were the copying machine fund, purchases of recordings and audio/visual materials, and bindery and landscaping services—a total of $3,350.

In protest, Board Member Margaret Ritchie resigned.

By February, the Library Board was more optimistic about finances and added 18 hours of service at its remaining facilities. Both North and South Branches would be open from 1 to 8 P.M. weekdays and from 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. on Saturdays. The fate of the shuttered Central Branch, still well stocked with books and records, remained in limbo.

Throughout the year, library collections declined. Berwyn now had no back files of magazines on microfilm or microfiche, and no cassettes or videos. Periodical subscriptions totaled 49; reference books, 200.

In September, Board Member Scarcello submitted his resignation to Mayor Lanzillotti, who held the communication until January, saying he thought Mr. Scarcello “might reconsider.” Director Polivka described the failure to notify the Library Board of the resignation as “only an oversight.”

That January of 1983, the library entered an agreement with the North Berwyn Park District to cosponsor a film program. And in almost an aside, Director Polivka reported a small leak in the roof at the North Branch and commented that a new roof might be needed. If the implications of that “small leak” were understood, there is no mention of it in the Board minutes. The only action taken was to authorize $225 in repairs. Ultimately, leaky roofs would take a toll on library collections, and Mrs. Polivka would go down in history as the legendary director who personally climbed up ladders to tar the roofs.

With the city proposing to increase the library budget from $91,366 in 1982 to $187,957 in 1983, the Library Board felt confident enough in February to begin advertising for a full-time director.

The 1983 budget included money for air-conditioning and roof repairs and an increased book budget of $30,000. The salary for a full-time director was pegged at $17,040 and employee salaries
were increased from $48,500 to $72,919, making the Board hopeful of expanding hours at both branches.

In February 1983, Ms. Elizabeth Mueller, consulting services director for the Suburban Library System, was asked to meet with the library’s Aldermanic Oversight Committee. According to *Berwyn Life* newspaper reports, she repeated a recommendation she had made to the Library Board three years earlier that the Central Branch be closed permanently. Citing the library’s small budget, the consultant said, “There is no way the city can do a credible job to support three libraries for a community of Berwyn’s size and population.”

Asked by a reporter for a solution to the library’s problems, Board Secretary Mary Karasek suggested one centrally located library instead of three branches. She and Alderman Richard Toman, chairman of the City Council’s library committee, agreed the former Berwyn Lumber Yard at 30th Street and Oak Park Avenue or the shuttered Piper School at 25th Street and Kenilworth Avenue might be possible sites. However, Alderman Toman cautioned that other uses for the properties already had been suggested by the city and South Berwyn Grade School District 100.

As to reopening the Central Library Branch in City Hall, Toman anticipated direction might come from a resident survey the aldermanic library committee had commissioned Consultant Mueller to complete. The survey also was expected to help the library set priorities for programs desired by residents and save money by eliminating those no longer wanted.

In 1939, the library opens a Central Branch in Berwyn City Hall, its first home in a city-owned building. The branch closed in 1982 due to budget constraints. *(Photo from the Berwyn Beacon, now a copyright of the Berwyn Historical Society)*
Korbel Named Fourth Director

Meanwhile, the library’s search for a director was bearing fruit, and on May 16, 1983, the Library Board voted to hire Albert Korbel as full-time director.

Mr. Korbel, a 38-year-old resident of Palatine, had served as administrator of the Bellwood Public Library from 1967 to 1979, where he had supervised a staff of 22. Raised in Berwyn, he attended St. Odilo Grade School and Morton West High School and obtained a Bachelor’s degree in literature from St. Procopius College in Lisle (now known as Illinois Benedictine University). He then worked as a freelance writer and job-site supervisor for Lancaster Courts Development, an independent carpentry contractor in Mt. Prospect.

City Council confirmation of the appointment was delayed more than a month while aldermen examined Mr. Korbel’s background. After city approval finally was secured, a meeting was scheduled for July 27, 1983, at the Central Branch so that Board and director could become acquainted before his first public Board meeting.

A big surprise awaited Director Korbel and Board members walking into the City Hall Branch, now closed for nearly 1½ years because of budget constraints. A wall had been partially constructed one-third of the way into the library to create offices for U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, who counted Berwyn as one of his constituent communities.

Immediately, questions were raised as to who authorized the work, who owned that portion of City Hall, and whether it was legal for a public official to rent space in the library, noted a story in the Berwyn Life. Board members were upset that they had not been consulted about the work. They noted a table had been broken during the construction and expressed concern that books could be damaged from the dust raised. The library trustees asked Director Korbel to obtain an explanation at a city department head meeting scheduled for the following day.

Mr. Korbel emerged from that meeting with an agreement by city officials to stop construction “for a while,” and his first days
on the job were devoted to resolving the space standoff with the city.

“Both the Library Board and city officials take different stands on who owns the Central Branch location,” noted the Berwyn Life. “The library is a department of the city and does not pay rent or utilities for that location. However, Library Board members say the library was added in City Hall through a special $10,000 donation when the building was first constructed. They note the carving of the word ‘Library’ on the outside of the building and the built-in bookshelves.”

When a Berwyn Life reporter asked Mayor Lanzillotti who had authorized the work, he replied, “It doesn’t matter,” and added that he “did not want to get into a fight situation.” The newspaper then cited interviews with assorted city officials, each of whom attributed the authorization for the construction to someone else.

The matter ended when City Attorney Russell Hartigan said that, since the city owned the entire building as a municipal corporation, he did not see how one portion could be set aside as belonging to someone else.

Now rendered moot were the new Library Director’s suggestions for centralizing all reference materials in the City Hall branch to make room in other library locations for more books. The 1982 “temporary” closing was accepted as permanent, and Mr. Korbel refocused on the needs of the North and SouthBranches.

Since the hot summer was almost over and the $30,000 budgeted to overhaul the branch air conditioning systems was still unspent, Director Korbel suggested the money could better be utilized for a new roof at the South Branch.

“Several years ago a flood caused costly damage to many children’s books,” Mr. Korbel noted. “The roof is 23 years old, has a history of leaks, and every rain, it [takes on] a little more water.”

With copying machine service costing $55 per month at each branch, the Board readily approved the director’s suggestion to lease new copiers for a monthly fee of $150 per machine. Revenues from a 10¢ charge per copy were expected to nearly cover the rental.

Noting that the lack of a telephone in the South Branch children’s books department forced staff members to run up and down stairs from basement to first floor to answer the phone,
Director Korbel asked for three additional phones at that location and one more for the North Branch on 16th Street. He also requested two communication lines at the North Branch to increase staff accessibility to patrons telephoning in with questions.

Salaries were raised to a range of $3.25 per hour for a library page to $6 to $9 for a full-time professional. The maintenance position was restored to full-time status, and among the first tasks assigned were installation of shelving and construction of a meeting room in the 16th Street basement.

In September, things began to look up for the short-handed Library Board. Down to three members for nearly a year, the Board received two new trustees—Mr. Michael Coghlan and Mr. Jeffrey Glass.

Albert Korbel, Director, 1983–89. (Photo courtesy of Berwyn Life)

Council Says “No” to Technology

The library’s requests for midyear budget adjustments were passed on to the City Council and approved. However, negotiations on the 1984 budget foundered. The City Council declined to allocate funds for a library computer system. According to a Berwyn Life newspaper report, the Council “allocated money instead to areas it felt could better serve the people of Berwyn.”

In 1984, the library again asked the Suburban Library System for help in analyzing studies and surveys on the strengths and weaknesses of Berwyn’s branch libraries. An SLS consultant also helped identify seven potential building sites. Most favored for being “centrally located and accessible by public transportation”
were the vacant Berwyn Theater property at Ridgeland Avenue and Cermak Road and the old greenhouse property at Oak Park Avenue and 29th Place. As with many similar recommendations, the report was accepted and placed on file.

Library Board and staff focused instead on improving services in their current locations. They had very little to work with.

In 1983, the year Albert Korbel came on as director, a comparison of Illinois public libraries prepared by the University of Illinois ranked Berwyn 52nd out of 54 cities in total expenditures per capita. By 1985–86, Berwyn had risen to 46th but still ranked below Calumet City and North Chicago.

Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, slim increases in funding had enabled the library to increase hours at both North and South Branches to 10 A.M. to 8 P.M. Monday through Thursday, 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. Friday, and 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. Saturday.

In a 1986 outreach to senior citizens, the library opened a branch in the Berwyn-Cicero Council on Aging in Cicero.

“We bought large print books specifically for the seniors, especially Harlequin romances, and the ladies just loved them,” recalled Mrs. Carol Shotola, a retired library employee. “They would crowd around me as soon as I came in the door with those books. We also reproduced crossword puzzles and word finds and mazes, as many as 75 copies at a time. Many of these people did not have much at home, and they would take the puzzles in order to have something to do in the evening.”

The collection of library books at the Council on Aging continued to grow, topping out at 500 titles around 1994. By the time the Council closed its doors in Cicero in 2005 and opened in smaller quarters in North Riverside, readership had declined and the library service was discontinued.

In 1987 the library also reached out to inspire children to read. Prominent people were asked to describe their favorite childhood books, and the library received responses ranging from actress Jane Alexander whose list included *Eleanor and Franklin* to Fred Rogers, host of the popular children’s television program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, who cited *The Secret Garden*.

Former First Ladies Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush did not name favorite books but sent inspirational messages:
“If you enjoy reading, you will never be alone,” wrote Mrs. Reagan. “You will always have a book as a friend.”

“Reading guarantees a life of interest and excitement,” wrote Mrs. Bush.

The message from Mike Singletary, Chicago Bears linebacker, was brief but on point: “Read to find yourself.”

To make sure the Berwyn Library’s print and audio/visual collections could meet any new patron interests sparked by the staff’s promotional efforts, library holdings were greatly expanded in the late 1980s:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>1982</th>
<th>1987</th>
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<tr>
<td>Magazine back files</td>
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<td>(microfilm or microfiche)</td>
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<td>Cassettes</td>
<td>–0–</td>
<td>664</td>
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<td>Videos</td>
<td>–0–</td>
<td>555</td>
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<td>520</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reference books</td>
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According to the *Berwyn Life*, the Berwyn Library’s Periodical Department was one of the first in the area to offer a computerized guide to magazines and newspapers for hands-on public use. “Many libraries have either News Bank or Magazine Index,” Director Korbel explained. “They don’t have both. And they usually keep them behind the desk where people can’t get at them.”

But there was a hidden price to these improvements—space. The basement of the 16th Street Branch was revamped to house an expanded Reference Department; a room at 34th Street now housed the new audio/visual service. But in both buildings, supplies had to be stored on shelves in narrow hallways. Additional book shelves were installed in already crowded rooms. Because space was no longer available to duplicate a full range of services in both buildings, library collections were split. The
North Branch became the reference repository; the South Branch housed the Children’s Department.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the expansions in services and facilities, the library still was a long way from meeting state standards.

“We need 75 more magazines, and I don’t know where I will put them,” Director Korbel told the *Berwyn Life*. “We should have 3½ books per capita, and we have about two. We should have 250 to 300 seats; we have a total of 75 to 100 in the two buildings. If we don’t meet certain standards, I feel the Suburban Library System will cut us off from reciprocal borrowing.”

That was of special concern because Berwyn’s out-of-district borrowing was on the rise.

“People who walk into the 34th Street Library and learn the Reference Department is at 16th Street say, ‘I don’t want to go to 16th for this when I can get everything I want in one building in another community,’” Mr. Korbel told a reporter.

“Our reference collection compares favorably with Oak Park. We have more to offer than Stickney, more than Riverside, but not in one place,” Korbel said. “That is why we are losing people.”

At the February 1987 Library Board meeting, the Director urged the importance of trying to find out more about Berwyn residents’ opinions of their library.

“I’d like to know who uses what library branches, how many people don’t know about all our services, and how the people would feel about having one building as opposed to two branches,” Mr. Korbel told the Board.

Moreover, the Director noted, a community survey was a prerequisite to qualify the library for state per capita grants. Prior to Mr. Korbel’s tenure, the Berwyn Library never had applied for the annual grants offered by the state based on population. Under his leadership, Berwyn had successfully applied for and received $46,628 in state funding for 1987. However, to qualify for future funding, the library would have to complete the community survey that the state required every five years.

The Board agreed to use some of the 1987 grant money to mail a survey to every residential address in the city.
District Status Explored

It also agreed to continue to explore the possibility of becoming a district library independent from the city. In November 1986, the Board had hosted a presentation by Ms. Beth Mueller, consulting services director for the Suburban Library System, and Mrs. Jane (Belon) Shaw, former Berwyn Library director in the late 1950s and now administrative librarian for the Lisle Public Library. Mrs. Shaw was asked to detail how her library moved out from under the authority of the Village of Lisle and became an independent district. She also explained the responsibilities of an elected board responsible for convincing voters to authorize a tax levy sufficient to support library services.

“We were presented with all the good points [at that meeting],” recalled Berwyn Library Board Member Ann Marrone. “But for all the good points, there had to be bad ones. She [Consultant Mueller] told the Board, ‘Everyone is going district.’ But when she said 150 out of 600 libraries in SLS have gone district, that’s not a whole lot.”

After an SLS workshop on the subject left Board members still puzzling over the same questions, they decided to invite a presentation by the head librarian and the board president of the Oak Park Library, since that institution recently had considered going district and decided against it. After several postponements, the Board finally hosted the Oak Park representatives in June 1987. According to Berwyn Life newspaper reports, the presentation again left many Berwyn Board members undecided.

“The decision confronting the Berwyn Library Board is clouded with the bias of each viewer,” concluded Board President Ray Hassler. Appointed to the Board to fill the vacancy created by the death of his mother, Mrs. Ann Hassler, the President then hung another cloud of uncertainty over the Board’s future direction by announcing his resignation “due to increased business responsibilities.”

As the Board adjourned that June for its traditional summer hiatus, Director Korbel urged trustees to use the vacation break to formalize goals. By the time meetings resumed in the fall, the
Board’s focus apparently had shifted because the major headline was “Building Fund Established.”

In September 1987, a $500 donation from the Friends of the Berwyn Library opened the way to establishing a Berwyn Public Library Building Fund. It was thought the fund might be used to:

- Maintain or renovate the existing properties;
- Hire consultants or architects to provide proposals, specifications, and blueprints for a new library building;
- Purchase property and construct a new building; or
- Furnish a new or revamped facility.

Almost as an aside, the *Berwyn Life* noted the library still was studying the possibility of separating from the city of Berwyn. It was a debate that would continue off and on into the next century without resolution. Alternately city or library officials would question whether taxpayers would be willing to raise the library’s tax levy sufficiently to support an independent district and whether private fundraising could make up the difference.

The 1987 discussions of “going district” did not lead to any action by the Board.

“I was in favor of a district library,” then Board President Nevaril-Lhotka would later recall. “But nobody wanted to leave the umbrella of the city. It was scary going all the way out on our own.”

Most Board members apparently felt they had more than enough challenges in trying to remedy library shortcomings while operating within the city’s safety net.

In a December 3, 1987, letter to Library Board and city officials, Director Korbel detailed those challenges and outlined a staff assessment of how library services could be delivered if a new facility was not to be available in the short term.

“While these buildings were fine in their time, they are no longer adequate to meet community needs,” Korbel wrote. “Some problems need immediate attention, and even though the solutions may appear temporary, they are necessary to maintain quality service. Our bottom line is that we feel the city has made a commitment to the library system and must now back that up with an infusion of financial support.”
The director identified four main problem areas:

First, we must acknowledge the hardship imposed on patrons by having the collection divided. Designating the 34th Street building as a browsing library does not make it easier for patrons or even staff to distinguish between “serious and less serious” nonfiction. The patron who wants a specific magazine article and a best seller must drive across town to get them both on the same day. Why go to the Berwyn Library when he could get both in the same building by driving to Oak Park?

Second, there is a lack of appeal. Sixteenth Street has no carpets, curtains, or seating. The Children’s Department windows, full of bullet holes, add to the negative impression. Neither building contains a room for meetings, for listening to AV materials, for typing or working on computers—all services a modern library should provide.

A third problem concerns our fiction and nonfiction collections. . . . Because the library cannot afford to double buy, neither building contains an adequate collection. A patron who begins in the Reference Department and then hopes to find more information in the main collection will probably be disappointed. Many titles are out of date, located at the other building, or not owned by the Berwyn Library.

While most area libraries are automating their card catalog, the Berwyn Library, because of budget constrictions, has no plan to do so. . . . The state of our card catalog is a disaster. In each building we have an old and a new catalog which are arranged differently. Cards may or may not indicate in which building the books are housed.

The Children’s Department at 16th is very inadequate, not only because of the Library’s inability to double buy books for two locations but also because students arriving after school cannot find a place to study in the Children’s Room. The students overflow into the Reference Room, where they disturb adult patrons. Further, they are forced to use adult reference materials because the children’s collection does not provide the materials they need.
Reconstruct or Build Anew?

Director Korbel then listed possible remedies suggested by the staff, including splitting services between the two buildings. One approach would turn the 16th Street Branch into a children’s library and the 34th Street Branch into a facility for adults, Mr. Korbel said. “This plan would end the need for double buying, department heads would spend less time running between buildings, and the arrangement would easily be grasped by patrons. The children’s building could have an alcove where parents might look at magazines or paperbacks [while their children browse]. “The makeup of the city supports such an approach,” the director explained, “because the 16th Street Branch is located near more schools. [But] it appears from circulation statistics more fiction is checked out at 16th even though 34th has the larger fiction collection.” Moreover, he noted, additional space would be required to combine adult fiction and nonfiction at the 34th Street Branch, a building incapable of expansion and with too few parking spaces to support increased use.

Another approach would be to move children’s services to 34th Street and reconfigure adult services in one of two ways, Mr. Korbel said:

1. 16th Street might be turned into a reference and nonfiction library, with 34th the center for children’s and adult fiction and AV (audio/visuals). The problem with such an approach, he noted, was that “70 to 80 percent of reference questions originated at 34th.”

2. With the exception of a good children’s reference section (to serve the area’s schoolchildren), the 16th Street Branch would house only large print, adult fiction, and bestsellers. The 34th Street Branch would house the Children’s Department and become a family-oriented library, “where a whole family could go to get reading materials.”

To gain space for reconfigured services, the library’s administrative offices might be moved to an office building or
rented storefront. Or, the 16th Street building could be extended to the east sidewalk on Elmwood Avenue.

Even if no moves were made, Korbel said, he considered it “imperative that the 16th Street building be expanded, carpeted, and given a facelift.”

In addition to suggesting ways to reconfigure the buildings, staff members also were recommending a new service to address the drop in circulation—a readers’ advisor. A designated staff member could help patrons obtain current fiction and nonfiction, track requests to reserve books already checked out of the library, and assist in requesting materials from other libraries, Director Korbel noted. At 16th Street, such a person could take incoming calls and help patrons in the stacks and with the card catalog. (It would be nearly a decade before such a service could be instituted.)

The Board’s response to these proposals was to seek help in determining whether a new library at a central location was possible. The director was asked to prepare a list of organizations that perform feasibility studies.

The City Council’s response was once again to pare down the library’s budget. The library requested $976,989. It received $518,335, nearly the same amount as the previous year. Dropped from the budget was the request for a $250,000 new building fund. The library had hoped to use this fund to hire a building consultant and develop the architectural drawings needed to apply for state construction grants either to retool existing facilities or build anew.

“I would love to see the library improved,” Alderman Michael Woodward told a Berwyn Life newspaper reporter. But as a member of both the City Council’s Budget and Library committees, Woodward said, “The cost is prohibitive right now.

“The question is whether the library is going to become independent [of city rule],” he added. “It then would have to raise its levy, and I don’t know if the citizens are ready to do that. I would like to see it go to referendum to see if the people want it.”

Director Korbel estimated that, in addition to state and city funding, the Berwyn Library would need to nearly triple its levy to cover the library’s portion of a possible $3 million project. He admitted to being disheartened by the elimination of the $250,000 building fund from the library budget. Without such a fund, he
said, “We might as well disband the Berwyn Library system or seek out Oak Park and Stickney or Riverside and Cicero and see if they want to split Berwyn’s clientele.”

Library Board President Nevaril-Lhotka conceded the library could do little without the support of the city administration. Nevertheless, she was optimistic.

“I was on the board that built these present buildings in the 1950s,” Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka told the *Berwyn Life*. “Maybe we can do it again.”

By the April Board meeting, Director Korbel also was encouraged. The Berwyn Public Library Building Fund had risen to $2,950, half the amount he considered necessary to “legitimately interview consultants to develop building plans.”

Director Korbel said he was particularly heartened by a $1,000 contribution from Mayor Lanzillotti, because it “showed by example that the mayor is willing to support our efforts.” The Director suggested the next goal would be to raise $25,000 to obtain architect renderings.

Any decision by the Board was to be guided by the results of a survey mailed to 16,000 residents and expected to be tabulated by mid-May.

That survey became the focus of debate at an April 1988 meeting of the All Berwyn Committee. According to *Berwyn Life* reports, some A.B.C. members who were not on the survey mailing list felt the library should have asked questions of all residents through a referendum.

The most heated discussion concerned the merits of a central library as opposed to the current branch system.

“The libraries may need repair, but a central library is going too far,” said one audience member. “The Berwyn Library does not need to keep growing,” he said, “because Berwyn residents could go to libraries in other suburbs. We don’t have to keep up with the Joneses.”

“We can’t be sponging off Chicago, Riverside, or Oak Park,” rebutted another A.B.C. member.

The debate was picked up that spring by the *Berwyn Life* in a series of articles titled, “Library at the Crossroads.”

“In the coming weeks, the Library Board must decide whether to shelve one or both of its existing buildings and construct a new
facility, or once again to apply ‘Band Aids’ to keep the system in its present form,” one article suggested.

“Through a communitywide survey and fund solicitation, the Board is reaching out to determine whether there is a community will and financial way to build a new library.

“During a facility tour last month by the Board’s Building and Grounds Committee, participants noted the system’s two branches share a common problem—a lack of space.

“Committee members noted narrow, crowded aisles and the inability of patrons to find a quiet place for reading or research. They noted the cost in dollars of trying to duplicate basic materials in two buildings and the cost in good will of trying to explain to frustrated families why children’s books are located in one building and reference materials in another.

“Committee members noted the space needed is not available on the existing properties. They suggested a new building was needed.

“'Back in the 1950s, they bought little pieces of land and tried to squeeze into them,’ explained Board Secretary Mary Karasek. ‘Nobody had the foresight to see that library service would change.’

“'The library of the 1980s is very different from a few decades back when it was a source for recreational reading and help with school work,’ agreed Ms. Beth Mueller, consultant services director for the Suburban Library System. ‘Today’s library is an information center. Adults want in-depth information for use in their present jobs or in obtaining new ones. They look to the library for technological information, business directories, even tax service forms.’”

As to the practice of maintaining two library locations instead of one, Consultant Mueller said, “It constantly dilutes services. The logical thing is to put it all in one place.”

The problem was where, the newspaper noted later in its Crossroads series. Of the seven possible building sites evaluated in 1984 by the Suburban Library System, only one remained by 1988—a vacant Ogden Avenue car dealership. SLS consultants had considered it “too small and too far southwest to be appropriate.”
The only addition to the site list was city-owned Janura Park property at 28th Street and Oak Park Avenue.

However, by April 1988, the attention of Board and staff was focused on immediate concerns, not future prospects.

**Budget Shortfall Threatens Service**

A shortfall in the 1988 budget threatened to close down the library over the winter months.

At a meeting reported in the *Berwyn Life*, Director Korbel informed Board members that the budget approved by the City Council was $39,500 short of the amount needed to pay staff salaries for the full year. The director said Mr. Alan Burton, the city’s administrative coordinator, had informed him it would not be possible to transfer funds from some other budget line item to meet the salaries. Further adding to the problem, the 16th Street Branch required some $8,500 in repairs.

“We thought about shutting down for the summer, but all the programs are in place,” Mr. Korbel said. “Rather than do something that drastic, that soon, we thought we should try to work it out with the [aldermanic] Budget Committee.”

“President Nevaril-Lhotka noted since services have been divided between the two library branches, it no longer was possible to close one branch and keep the other open, a practice followed during a previous financial crisis,” the newspaper reported.

As to 16th Street repairs, the Board agreed to replace broken windows on the northwest side of the building with smaller casement windows and brick up the remainder of the window wall. The approach was expected to reduce heating and air conditioning costs by 20 percent and eliminate the need to replace the draperies.

Director Korbel asked Board members to consider a small expansion of the North Branch, noting that, even if proposals to build a new library went forward, they would “be living in the 16th Street facility for at least five years.”

Earlier proposals to expand the 16th Street Branch along its entire length proved too costly, the director said, because air-conditioning equipment would have to be moved. He suggested a
small front or side addition could provide much-needed space at an estimated cost of $100,000. The South Branch on 34th Street had insufficient land for any expansion.

Having failed to receive responses to earlier requests to discuss these issues with aldermanic oversight committees, the trustees decided to “write their aldermen” to ask for a meeting. They also decided to write the city administration asking for guidelines on dealing with the media since Director Korbel had reported receiving criticisms about what he and Library Board members “were saying to the press.”

“We don’t want to embarrass the city, and we are not out to be malicious,” Mr. Korbel said, “but obviously, the Library Board should be free to speak.”

As the issue continued to fester over the next few months, Board Secretary Mary Karasek questioned, “How can we conduct a public meeting without making public statements? We have the right to express our opinions.”

The Board’s letters elicited a quick response on at least one front. By mid-May, city and library representatives were holding joint discussions.

“The city must help the library.” That affirmation of support from Alderman Anthony DiMenna, chairman of the City Council’s Library Oversight Committee, heartened those in attendance at that May meeting. In addition to Director Korbel, the library was represented by Board President Nevaril-Lhotka and Members Ann Marrone, Doris Remp, and Rosemary Scola. Accompanying Alderman DiMenna were Alderman Lawrence Menchetti, chairman of the City Council’s Budget Committee, and City Comptroller Allen Zank.

By meeting’s end, the Berwyn Life reported, those present had:

- Found a solution to the $39,000 shortfall that threatened to close the library doors from October to December;
- Agreed to seek Council approval to hire an architect for North Branch renovations;
- Authorized Director Korbel to explore with the North Berwyn School District the possibility of joint library-
school parking on school-owned land at 16th Street and Gunderson Avenue; and

- Opened the way for further city-library discussions on building a new full-service facility while retaining the 16th Street location as a partial-service branch.

“Early in the meeting, Alderman Menchetti and Comptroller Zank found the answer to budgeting problems,” the newspaper reported. Contradicting information Director Korbel had received earlier, Alderman Menchetti insisted funds could be transferred from one line item to another to meet the expected shortfall in salary appropriations.

Board members were delighted to discover they actually had more money to work with than anticipated. In the final hours of the city’s budget process, the library’s portion had been raised from $468,000 to $514,870. But the library never had been informed of the increase. Not only would the $39,000 shortfall be covered, but the library would be able to repair its broken windows at 16th Street.

Director Korbel then went a step further, suggesting a $100,000 mortgage be taken out on the South Branch to pay for an addition to the North.

Mr. Menchetti said the aldermanic committee would “take the suggestion under consideration,” the newspaper reported. “But we are talking $100,000 for a building that is woefully inadequate in parking,” Menchetti noted. As to a long-range solution, he urged the Library Board to “take a vote and put in writing” what members wanted to do in the immediate and long term not only regarding physical facilities but whether the library wanted to become an independent taxing district.

Director Korbel explained that, in its present status, the library only could levy at a rate that would bring in $350,000 to $400,000 (annually). “There is no way we can operate a new, major facility for that amount,” he said. “We can’t operate for that amount now.”

Either the city would have to fund a new building and its daily operational costs, Mr. Korbel said, or the library would have to “go district, sell bonds and have a sufficient tax base to support the operation.” In either case, the director noted that new construction could not be completed for at least five years. Depending on where
the new facility was located, he added, “We might need to keep 16th Street open.”

Alderman Menchetti concurred, saying, “I think the citizens of Berwyn are interested in two branches, not one central library.” Noting most available building sites appeared to be south of Cermak Road, the alderman maintained, “There are small children who could not cross Cermak and senior citizens who can’t travel that far.”

According to a the *Berwyn Life* report, Director Korbel favored maintaining a branch system “so long as one of the facilities offered full service. Berwyn now has services divided between the two buildings because the facilities are so small,” he noted. “We can’t operate everything in one building. I have never come across anything in this country similar to this type of operation.”

The meeting ended with aldermen and library leaders anticipating guidance from an April survey that, unlike the 1988 version, had been mailed to every home in Berwyn.

Heartened by Uncertainty

In June, Director Korbel summarized the preliminary results of that survey. Of the 1,512 respondents, many of whom checked off multiple uses, a total of 429 said they patronized the 16th Street Branch, 657 used 34th, 305 used both; and 100 used neither. A total of 552 respondents patronized another library.

A total of 834 said they would like all collections at a single library, and 495 said no.

As to a referendum, 676 said they would vote to build a new library, 341 said no, and 477 were unsure.

“That means more people were unsure than said no to a referendum,” Director Korbel noted. When taking into account the large number that said they would prefer all library services under one roof, Mr. Korbel concluded that, with the right construction plan, a solid base of support existed for building a central library.
While many Berwyn residents were looking outside their community for library services, some nonresidents preferred the Berwyn facility.

In July, Sister Cyril, a nun at Loretto Hospital in Chicago, began serving an internship at the Berwyn Library as a requirement for completing a degree in library technical assistance service from the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn. She told the local newspaper that she chose the Berwyn Library because of its friendliness and its proximity to Loretto Hospital, and because it was the only library that offered her a library card.

“Oak Park and Cicero would not give a nonresident a card,” Sister Cyril said. “Oak Park wanted $50 (for such a card). When I came to the Berwyn Library, I found they were very helpful.”

For its part that July, the library received a helping hand from Summerfaire Inc. The organizers of Berwyn’s summer festival gave the library $5,000 to help fund the hiring of a building consultant. Together with other gifts and fundraiser proceeds, the Board decided in November that it was financially positioned to sign a contract with Consultant Richard Thompson. For a fee between $3,500 and $4,500, Mr. Thompson was commissioned to evaluate the present two-branch system and recommend whether the community would best be served by one central library or one full-service library and one branch.

Responding to newspaper articles quoting people as saying they had lost interest in saving pennies and were giving or even throwing them away, the library embarked on a “Pennies for the Library” fundraiser. Containers were placed in the two branches and adults and children were encouraged to donate their pennies to build a new library. By the end of 1988, the building fund had grown to $9,000, and further fundraising was postponed to a time when an architect would be needed.

Meanwhile, efforts were made to address at least some of the library’s shortcomings.

At the North Branch, renovations permitted separate desks to be established for children’s circulation and reference and opened a way to offer readers’ advisory services to patrons. However, a lack of space and funds prevented the institution of readers’ advisory services at the South Branch. The library even lacked funds to hire a cleaning service.
Adult circulation declined by nearly 11,000 between 1987 and 1988. Juvenile books and audio/visual materials suffered similar decreases. Only adult audio/visual circulation showed a gain—789 over the previous year.

To better cover the after-school and after-work crowd, library hours were changed from 8 A.M.—4 P.M. to 9 A.M.—5 P.M. at both locations.

Additional reference books and 25 new periodical subscriptions were purchased. Nevertheless, the Berwyn Library still did not meet state reference standards.

Resignation Rocks Library

“The Berwyn Library Board’s Budget Committee never got beyond the first line of their fiscal 1989 budget review before the first bomb dropped,” was the lead on a story in the January 20 issue of the *Berwyn Life*.

“When Board Member Patricia Maietta questioned a proposed 55 percent increase from $20,548 to $35,000 in the library director’s annual salary, Director Albert Korbel responded, ‘That is the salary I think you will have to pay to get my replacement.’”

After researching what library directors usually are paid, Mr. Korbel said he found the minimum starting salary was $35,000. “Last year, $20,800 was budgeted for the Berwyn director’s salary,” he noted.

Director Korbel also proposed salary increases for professional and clerical staff, explaining, “The library has been unable to hire qualified personnel at the rate it presently is able to pay.” The director said the situation was especially acute in the Technical Services Department, where the supervisory position had been vacant for many months and books were piling up uncatalogued.

Money for air conditioning repairs at the South Branch also was high on the request list and increased custodial service as well, the newspaper reported. “As the building is falling apart, the maintenance man is doing more maintenance and not cleaning,” Mr. Korbel explained.
To give the Library Board time to find a replacement, Director Korbel said he would stay on until March 28, the day the budget was expected to be passed by the City Council. This would enable Mr. Korbel not only to continue crunching the numbers but to work with the building consultant as well.

Demonstrating that library facilities were indeed in need of maintenance and repairs, a carbon monoxide leak closed the library on February 8 and forced the Board to move its monthly meeting to City Hall.

Nevertheless, the budget negotiations bore little fruit. The budget for the entire City of Berwyn increased by only $217,000. That amount divided among the various departments of the city meant a scant increase for the library. An $11,000 hike in library salaries and $13,000 for maintenance and repairs was achieved by cutting $26,000 out of reference and adult book purchases. The salary slated for a new library director was set at $24,126.

Work with Consultant Thompson proved more successful.

On March 8, the consultant presented a building analysis and construction proposal that later became the template for promoting the referendum.

“Collections have approached no growth,” Mr. Thompson noted. “There is no staff work place so staff must share tables in public areas. Neither building can serve senior citizens who can’t climb stairs.”

For the library to operate at minimum standards set by the Illinois Library Association’s “Avenues to Excellence,” Thompson said the Berwyn branches should have a book collection of 178,698 to serve the city’s population of 46,849. Instead, only 103,633 volumes were available.

Further, the consultant noted, to house even the current collection adequately would require 18,360 square feet of storage and display space and an additional 526 feet for patrons and staff.

“An increase in space is needed just to operate the present library in accordance with generally accepted levels of patron convenience and staff efficiency,” Mr. Thompson concluded. He then repeated a refrain of library consultants throughout the years:

This is too small a community to support two libraries well. You have more libraries than you can afford. That is not to say you can’t have two buildings. It may be
politically easier to do that, but the end result will not be as good.

Asked about adding on to the existing buildings, Thompson’s off-the-cuff reaction was, “Nothing you have will support an addition of the size needed.”

Based on Northeast Planning Commission projections that Berwyn would have 44,000 people by the year 2010, the consultant suggested constructing a building of 76,065 square feet. “That space would be sufficient for 20 years,” he anticipated. Then an additional 13,200 square feet might be needed to serve “unforeseen needs of the future.”

But although Mr. Thompson urged the need for haste in refining his report because of the anticipated availability of millions of dollars in state construction funds in the fall, the Library Board placed the matter on hold until a new director was in place.

In late March, the library suffered another blow. Trustee Patricia Maietta resigned, charging the Board was “a powerless appendage of City Hall.”

Koppe Becomes Fifth Director

Finally, at a special meeting on May 15, 1989, the Library Board hired Mrs. M. Kathleen Koppe of North Riverside as the new director. Mrs. Koppe’s career had begun with employment by the Melrose Park Public Library while she was still a student at Triton College in River Grove and Rosary College in River Forest. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from Rosary in 1976, she worked as a serials library assistant at Loyola Law School Library in Los Angeles, and then moved on to a position at Newport Center Branch Library in Newport Beach, California. She later worked as technical librarian for the American Medical Association in Chicago.

Mrs. Koppe’s Berwyn employment was decided by a split 4–2 vote of the Board. Voting in favor of the employment were Vice President Rosemary Scola, Secretary Mary Karasek, and Members
Ann Marrone and Doris Remp. Voting against were President Nevaril-Lhotka and Member Suzanne Camacho.

According to the *Berwyn Life*, Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka declined direct comment on her vote. “The majority rules,” she said, and then emphasized, “The entire board will support the new director.”

Of those voting to employ Mrs. Koppe, Secretary Karasek was the only one to explain her position, saying she favored the candidate’s 15-plus years of experience in public and academic libraries, compared with the other finalist, who had just graduated from library school.

The new director’s first challenge was to lead the Board and staff to a consensus on whether to repair and expand the existing buildings or follow Consultant Thompson’s recommendation to construct a new building. However, there were obstacles in her path, the major one being a “disheartened staff with a high turnover rate,” according to a *Berwyn Life* analysis.

“Sixteen out of 40 staff members left last year,” the newspaper reported. “To cover staff shortages, Reference personnel help out in the Children’s Department. Everybody pitches in to catalog new acquisitions since no replacement has been found for the Technical Services director, who left in December.

“The staff’s frustrations boiled over with Mrs. Koppe’s appointment,” the newspaper noted. Staff members, who first learned of the appointment when they read it in the newspaper, came to the Board to question the new director’s credentials. They maintained that, under new state requirements, a library director was expected to have a Master of Library Science degree, whereas Mrs. Koppe possessed only a Bachelor of Arts. They noted that several current staff members had more experience than the new director.

“Board members told the staff that the Board had selected the most qualified candidate among those who applied,” the newspaper reported. “They asked why staff failed to apply for the position themselves. They questioned how much longer they could continue without a director in place and said they had done the best they could with the salary available.”

City Administrative Coordinator Lawrence Zdarsky told the newspaper that both staff and Board were “misinformed.”
In an interview with the newspaper, Zdarsky said he knew of no state requirement that a library director must possess a master’s degree in library science. “Because the Board had not set a salary . . . we put into the 1989 budget what Mr. Korbel’s salary would have been this year. We told the Board that if they needed more time or money, they could have it.”

“The law allows the Board great independence,” Mayor Lanzillotti said, “and it is the Board’s responsibility to make appointments. We have never interfered with the Director or the Board. I want the best library our money can buy.”

To improve communications in the future, Zdarsky and the mayor agreed to appoint a member of the city’s law department to deal with legal questions the Board might have. They also promised a more active aldermanic oversight committee.

A *Berwyn Life* reporter turned to Beth Mueller, consultant services director for the Suburban Library System, for the last word on the subject. Consultant Mueller told the reporter that, although state law did not require a library to hire a director with a master’s degree, a library could jeopardize its state per capita grants if it failed to do so.

“The law for per capita grants says libraries must either meet or show progress at meeting Illinois Library Association standards,” Consultant Mueller said. “One of those standards is that any library that serves more than 5,000 people should have at least one full-time professional librarian with a Master of Library Science degree.”

With a population of 46,000, Berwyn could lose more than $46,000 in state grants annually, the consultant observed. “This would be more than enough to pay the additional salary needed to attract a director with an MLS degree.”

To their credit, Board and director were able to put the controversy behind them, and after Mrs. Koppe had completed one month on the job, local newspaper headlines read, “New Director Pleases Board.”

Director Koppe’s initial reaction to the Thompson report was that she “didn’t think the city needs exactly what the report is proposing [70,000 feet of new library space].” Relaying her impressions at the June Library Board meeting, the director said, “I don’t see how we can afford the Thompson proposal. This is like
the ultimate, perfect library. The report did not seem to address whether Berwyn needs this for the type of patrons we have.”

Board and city officials seemed receptive to her interpretation, and Director Koppe focused on the attainable. She recommended replacing at least one branch telephone system, noting telephones had been improperly wired to handle the automated circulation database system to which the library subscribed, a system intended to meet patrons’ requests for materials and information by contacting some 60 other libraries by computer. An emergency request for $5,000 to replace one telephone system already had been forwarded to city officials, Mrs. Koppe reported. The second library branch could be rewired the following year.

Yet another in the seemingly endless series of library surveys was undertaken in the fall of 1989. This latest analysis concentrated on library users, and, in an appearance before the All Berwyn Committee, Director Koppe confided it had altered her perspective on facility needs.

“After repeatedly being told that a central library is ‘a very volatile issue and a bad thing to bring up,’” Mrs. Koppe told A.B.C. members she was “pleasantly surprised” when the survey showed a new and more convenient location of services was one of the top patron concerns.

Director Koppe said a follow-up, general population survey had been requested by Mayor Lanzillotti, and would be sent in June to all of the city’s postal service customers.
1980s Bestsellers

Noble House • James Clavell
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial Storybook • William Kotzwinkle
The Talisman • Stephen King
The Mammoth Hunters • Jean Auel
Clear and Present Danger • Tom Clancy
1990s

Growth Pleads for New Facility

As the decade turned, library patronage soared. The library was packed with people every available day and night. Between 1990 and 1991, the number of library card holders grew 10 percent. Borrowing increased by 28,000, and reference questions by 10,500. The time seemed right to act on the Thompson recommendations for a new library.

The construction proposal received editorial support from the *Berwyn Life*:

> By nursing and patching two aging buildings, Berwyn Library staff members have tried to stuff the informational and technological explosion of the 1980s and ’90s into structures built in the ’60s.
>
> A succession of librarians have climbed atop the buildings at 16th Street and 34th Street to tar the roofs, taken up hammers to install dividing walls, and taken home chairs to paint and refinish—all to save taxpayers money.
>
> Staff members have divided library collections and services between the two buildings and moved whole departments of books and furnishings from the first floor to balcony to basement—all to secure space for vitally needed materials.

But there were problems with the division of services, the paper noted. North side residents were irritated that story times and videos were offered almost exclusively in the South Branch. South side patrons coveted the full reference service housed in the North.

“Research-minded [South Berwyn residents] rebel at waiting for materials to be delivered from one branch to another,” observed the newspaper. “If they have to drive to 16th Street for reference
works, patrons say, they might as well keep on driving to the Oak Park library, which has more to offer.”

Staff time had to be divided between the two locations, resulting in fewer hours of service at each. The 16th Street Children’s Department was open only from 1:30 to 9 P.M. Mondays through Thursdays and until 6 P.M. Fridays during the school year. Space was so limited at the 16th Street location that children’s programs could be offered only once or twice a year. Director Koppe believed preschoolers were “getting left out.”

The newspaper article continued:

In peak evening and weekend hours, seating was totally inadequate. People huddled around one or two tables adjacent to the circulation desk, their concentration broken by jangling telephones and the exchange of questions and answers by staff members and patrons.

Since there was no public meeting room, patrons attending Library movie nights contended with the glare of city streetlights and passing cars through curtainless windows. The library had no computers for public use because there was no place to put them.

Apart from two basement closets and a portion of the boiler room, the library had basically no storage space. Bound newspapers and periodicals were stored in basement hallways next to the boiler room in both branches.

All collections were at “virtual no-growth.” No additional shelving could be installed without reducing already limited table seating. The freestanding shelves were almost totally full; the collections required frequent heavy weeding; and the library’s holdings sagged below state standards for a facility of its size.

In 1990, a joint City/Library Advisory Board was formed. Aldermen Anthony DiMenna and Michael Woodward and the city’s administrative coordinator, Lawrence Zdarsky, represented City Hall. Representing the library were Director Koppe and Board Members Nevaril-Lhotka, Scola, and Betty Wojcik, who was also director of the Berwyn Development Corporation.

Mr. Zdarsky suggested the committee take another look at the possibility of establishing the library as an independent taxing district. Noting that the Berwyn Park District was negotiating to buy property at 29th Street and Oak Park Avenue, land long
desired as a library building site, Mr. Zdarsky suggested other possibilities. One alternative might be to swap the existing library branches for Berwyn Township land on which to construct a new library, he said. Another might be to convert the present City Hall into a library and construct a new municipal building elsewhere.

### Building Hopes Center on Park

Neither proposal gained acceptance, and finally, on the advice of the joint committee, the Library Board recommended to the City Council that the best, most cost-effective plan was to build a new facility on the western boundary of city-owned Janura Park at 28th Street and Oak Park Avenue.

Based on support from the joint advisory body, the Library Board voted 6–1 on February 11, 1991, to hire the architectural firm of PSA to design a new building. Board President Scola cast the dissenting vote, saying she did not feel the Board was in a position to hire an architect “because the necessary funds are not in the budget.” However, Mrs. Scola joined in the decision to employ PSA for prereferendum schematic design services contingent on approval by the City Council of a $25,000 line item in the budget. Casting the lone nay on the second vote was Member Suzanne Camacho.

As North Berwyn residents became aware that change was in the wind, they began attending Library Board meetings to express their views. In February, a group of North Berwynites said they did not favor keeping the North Branch open unless it continued to offer juvenile books. By April, another group of North Berwynites, fearful their branch would be closed, began lobbying to expand the existing libraries rather than build a new central facility. In response, the Board allotted an additional $3,500 for PSA Architect David Patton to study that possibility.

That summer the library began publishing a newsletter to make the case for a new building and muster public support for a bond issue referendum to support its construction.

“Berwyn’s current library, housed in two separate buildings, is one of the smallest libraries serving one of the largest populations.
in the suburbs,” the publication noted. “Because the two buildings
together offer almost three times less space than the state
requirements for a community of Berwyn’s size, the library can
offer only half the number of books suggested by state guidelines.

“Unfortunately, structural problems and lot sizes limit the
renovation of existing buildings,” noted Director Koppe.
“Preliminary studies show the structures may not be able to
withstand second story additions. Also, heating and cooling
systems appear inadequate; the buildings are not handicapped
accessible; and parking, especially at 34th Street, is a problem.”

Mrs. Koppe said these concerns would be addressed in the PSA
feasibility study. She encouraged residents to take part in public
hearings to be held by the architects. “This is our opportunity to
create a great library,” she urged.

PSA architects presented a design for a two-story brick and
stone structure “reminiscent of early 20th century American
architecture.” The building would feature a public information area
near the front entrance, a children’s story room and a series of
intimate reading areas or “front rooms” for the various
departments. A large public meeting room would house up to 200
people but would be equipped with folding partitions to
accommodate smaller groups as well. A separate entrance would
permit adult programming even when other library services were
closed.

The proposed construction carried a $7.9 million price tag,
including the cost of moving existing tennis courts and a wading
pool from the Janura Park site.

That July, the Library Board learned of more expenses to
come. Administrative Coordinator Zdarsky told the Board the
referendum also would have to seek funds for the development of a
soccer field for Berwyn.

“The Library Board was taken aback by Mr. Zdarsky’s
statement,” Board Secretary Karasek recorded in the minutes. “It
was a new hitch in the referendum.”
That fall, the *Berwyn Life* editorials were urging the Library to “Go for it! . . . Ask voters if they will buy into the dream.” The Library Board held back.

Citing numerous funding requests already in place on the November ballot and “recent property assessments which have severely affected taxpayers,” the Board decided to sit out the November election and wait until spring.

In December, the City Council voted to place the binding library construction referendum on the March 17, 1992, ballot along with two advisory referendums regarding senior housing and registration of legal nonconforming properties.

By the next month, the Council withdrew the two advisory referendums and asked the Library Board to withdraw its referendum as well. City officials wanted to make room on the ballot for a referendum requested by the Berwyn-based National Taxpayers United of Illinois seeking repeal of Berwyn’s home rule powers.

Although it was only necessary to withdraw one referendum, Mayor Lanzillotti maintained the three deletions would enable voters to focus on the issue of home rule and enable the city to “battle one-on-one a proposal presented as tax relief but really a matter of autonomy. Home rule,” the mayor said, “allows a city to operate without state oversight to pass its own ordinances to protect its people and assist in community and economic development.”

To place a nearly $8 million bond issue to be paid for through property taxes on the same ballot as the home rule issue “could be construed as inconsistent and confusing to the voter,” the mayor said. “We could put both in jeopardy. Our department heads feel the library is only one of the city’s seven departments, whereas home rule affects every department. The library will not suffer by sacrificing at this time a matter that can easily be brought forward in the future.”

Nevertheless, the Library Board voted to keep the bond issue on the ballot.
Despite reservations voiced by President Scola and Vice President Marrone that the library might become a bone of contention in the larger fight between the city and the taxpayers group, they joined in the unanimous vote to pursue the March 17 referendum.

“We did not want to give the appearance of backing down from a fight with the taxpayers group,” Library Board Secretary Wojcik explained to city officials. “We understand the city’s position and will work to support you. We have to do what is best for the library, and you have to do what is best for the city.”

The City Council then did what it thought best and voted to delete the library referendum from the ballot. Library backers had no choice but to prepare for a November election instead.

The PSA building model that was prepared to promote the March referendum became part of an informational road show to demonstrate to taxpayers what their $7.9 million investment could buy. The model helped win the support of many residents, but criticism persisted and alternative suggestions kept on coming.

One alternate proposal was to retool the former Olympic Federal Savings building at 6201 Cermak Road as a central library instead of building a new facility. The proposal was backed by the Berwyn Homeowners Association, and the Library Board took another time out to have PSA examine its feasibility.

By August, the results of the architectural study were in hand. “It would cost nearly $1 million more to retool the former Olympic Federal building [than to construct a new library].” Board President Rosemary Scola told the newly formed Committee for a New Berwyn Public Library. Mrs. Scola said PSA found the Olympic Federal site unsatisfactory primarily because:

- To achieve the square footage experts said was needed for a city of Berwyn’s size, Olympic building space would have to be nearly doubled through construction of an addition.
- Olympic’s off-site parking could make up for only a portion of the on-site spaces that would be lost to the construction of such an addition.
- A significant amount of Olympic floor structures would require replacement and/or reinforcement since its load-
bearing capacity was “far short” of the 150 pounds required for library stacks.

- “Antiquated” mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection systems would not meet the needs of a major building expansion.
- Architectural and engineering fees for remodeling would be 1.5 percent higher and construction contingencies double those for a new building.
- Renovating the Olympic facilities was estimated to cost $8.6 million compared with the $7.9 million price tag for relocating recreational facilities on city-owned property and constructing a new building.

Helping to make the case for the new construction was this comparison of services then available in the existing library branches, those required under Illinois State Library “Avenues to Excellence” standards, and those that could be offered in the new building:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>State Required</th>
<th>New Building</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>103,633</td>
<td>131,949</td>
<td>132,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periodicals</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio/visuals</td>
<td>4,198</td>
<td>7,900</td>
<td>10,898</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Editor’s Note: Includes duplications required to serve two buildings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amenity</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>New Library</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parking spaces</td>
<td>7 per branch</td>
<td>100 on site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting space</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Space for 200 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet study areas</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6 study carrels, 2 study rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth story room</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Seating for 30 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washrooms</td>
<td>1 unisex per building</td>
<td>6 bathrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handicap accessible</td>
<td>Front desk only</td>
<td>Elevators to all services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The *Berwyn Life* noted additional advantages to new construction:

An elevator will bring every library service within reach of elderly and handicapped patrons. [They] no longer will need to wait in the vestibule with their wheelchairs and walkers while staff members chase up and down stairs and through narrow, crowded aisles to secure desired materials.

As the November 3 referendum neared, the newspaper undertook a series of articles called “Berwyn Books a Referendum.” Among other things, the initial story compared operational costs of operating two buildings as opposed to one:

According to a State Library Research Center survey, it cost approximately $100,000 more to operate Berwyn’s two branches in 1987–88 than single libraries in 10 other communities with similar equalized assessed valuations. Most of the overage went for salaries, yet Berwyn’s hourly [pay] rate was less than the other 10.

Although a new and larger facility might cost more to operate, the newspaper noted, it would enable the library to use staff more efficiently and offer expanded hours, materials, and equipment. “This will reduce the operational cost per square foot by $21.76 annually and offer taxpayers ‘more service for less money.’”

Residents Question Plans

Nevertheless, residents continued to question the project.

In a letter to the Library Board, Mr. Greg Ostrowski, president of the Berwyn Homeowners Association, said his organization believed the November 3 referendum would have a lot better chance of passing “if the plan were complete. As approved by the City Council, the bond issue includes $150,000 to cover the cost of moving the wading pool and tennis courts. . . . [Our members] want to know where the existing recreational facilities will be relocated.”
Mr. Ostrowski also noted the referendum authorized the city to sell the existing buildings once a new library is constructed. “The city then is free to use for its own purposes the proceeds from the sale of the buildings, which have a joint appraised value of $500,000,” he observed. “If there were a commitment by the city that the properties would be sold and the revenues gained would reduce the bond issue cost, residents and taxpayers would have a clear picture of the overall plan.”

The Library Board forwarded the Homeowners Association letter to city officials, noting the Board had no control over the disposition of the city-owned buildings. “We were told it would not be our decision to make,” President Scola said, “and that it was up to the city to do what it wanted with these buildings.”

Some residents thought the existing library buildings should be retained and retooled. Library spokesmen cited PSA estimates that it would cost $32,000 to repair the 40-year-old buildings and $20 million for land acquisition and construction to make the combined 18,000 square feet of the two existing branches equal the 58,000 square feet of the new facility. Another $100,000 would be needed to make the old tri-level buildings comply with the new federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Even worse, to provide wheelchair clearance, half the library shelving would need to be removed, library officials noted.

Still other residents questioned why the present library branches had not been built to last longer than 30 years. Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka, the only current Board member who had served when the branches were built, responded that they were “the best we could get at the time. In the 1950s we wanted to build only one library, but people wanted one on the north side and one on the south.”

Architect David Patton promised the new library would be built to last, noting the 28th Street site had sufficient space for initial construction of 58,000 square feet plus a later lateral expansion of 18,000 square feet when needed.

Nevertheless, the persistent questioning began taking a toll on referendum supporters. Pessimistically assessing the temper of the community, the Library Board started hedging its bets. In October, the Board decided to submit to the City Council a 1993 operating budget request of $723,727 and wait until after the
November referendum to request capital improvements. If the referendum failed, $45,539 in improvement funds would be requested, with $32,208 of that amount allotted for repairs, plus:

- $10,126 to replace frayed carpeting and draperies to block out streetlights interfering with adult film programs at the South Branch;
- $35,413 for contractual obligations for the new automated circulation system;
- $1,150 for an ADA-required text telephone for each building to enable the hearing-impaired to print out questions and answers on a computer screen.

Director Koppe explained that the $29,308 allotted for repairs in 1992 proved inadequate. Even before the heat could be turned on that fall in the North Branch, the boiler had to be repaired and asbestos removed. “We already spent $32,000,” she said, “and another $6,900 in bills is expected.”

Referendum Rejected

The 1992 referendum was endorsed by the Berwyn Youth Commission, Berwyn Development Corp., Latinos Organization of Berwyn and the superintendents of both the North and South grade school districts. But key support was missing. The South Berwyn Council of PTAs found some members viewed the referendum as “political” and so the organization took no stand. North Berwyn parents said they did not think kids would walk to 28th Street and Oak Park Avenue to get to a library. The Berwyn Democratic organization opted to “let the people decide.” However, the party offered promotional literature to precinct captains who wished to distribute it, and one of those who agreed to do so was Mr. Samuel Stillo, president of the Berwyn Property Improvement Board and a member of the North Berwyn Park District Board. Later, as alderman and head of the City Council’s Library Oversight
Committee, Mr. Stillo would play a key role in resolving the library’s problems. Proponents argued that the library bond issue would cost the owner of a $100,000 market value home only 8¢ per day, “the equivalent of one cup of coffee per week.” Opponents appeared unmoved by the argument. Thus, two days before the election, the Berwyn Life was reporting, “Even the most ardent supporters concede it will be a close vote.”

“Close” turned out to be an overstatement. The referendum was defeated 8,929 to 8,142. The proposal carried in only the 1st and 3rd wards.

“We realize the current economic climate had a major impact on the vote,” Board President Scola told the newspaper. Also contributing was a lack of manpower to go door to door to get out the vote. “With less than 15 active workers on the committee and without organized support from the Berwyn Democratic Party,” said Mrs. Scola, “I feel we did good.”

As the votes were tallied November 3, Mayor Joseph Lanzillotti told a Berwyn Life reporter he was “very proud” that his precinct and his ward had the most votes for the library. He suggested a survey was needed to determine why voters, particularly those in north Berwyn, voted against it.

“For a first-time effort and considering the general anti-tax mood of the voters, I think this was an excellent result,” said Corporation Counsel Zdarsky.

Determined to try again to pass their referendum the following November, library backers continued throughout 1993 to try to persuade residents to support their cause. They argued that if it was fear of higher taxes that led voters to reject the new construction referendum, taxes would have to be raised anyway to rehabilitate the existing buildings.

“Otherwise,” they said, “significant fines will be levied against Berwyn for not abiding by the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires all buildings to be handicapped accessible. The mandated renovation would destroy much of the current library space because aisles would have to be enlarged and elevators installed.” The library would be unable to access available state funding because there would not be enough room to put additional materials or computers.
By the beginning of 1993, the library’s uncertain status appeared to be fraying relationships between the Library Board and city officials and the Board and the library director.

“After studying their responsibilities as listed in state statutes, Board members in February asked city officials to clarify whether aldermen have authority to cut the library’s levy request and raise staff salaries as had been done in the past,” the *Berwyn Life* reported. By April, they also were questioning why nearly $17,000 in copier fees and late-book fines were deposited into the city’s corporate funds instead of the library’s coffers.

They also asked for city guidelines on departmental use of petty cash. At issue was Director Koppe’s decision to use petty cash funds to purchase $3,145 in new draperies from a suburb other than Berwyn. No one at the time anticipated that the director’s future might be hanging on those draperies. All Board members thought of was the policy they had established to “buy in Berwyn wherever possible” and to require prior Board approval of expenditures over $2,000 “except in an emergency.”

“Director Koppe said since the draperies were paid for out of state grant money the expenditure was not the Board’s responsibility but hers as overseer of state funds,” the newspaper reported. But Board members insisted “state laws made the Board responsible for every penny spent.” Board members also questioned the policy of keeping as much as $1,192 in a checking account labeled petty cash, an account that required the signatures of two staff members for withdrawals but no Board members. The Board decided to wait until after the April elections to discuss these issues with the new mayor.

By April 24, the library had a new problem. The 34th Street Branch ceiling came down on volunteers working at a book sale fundraiser for the Committee to Build a New Berwyn Library.

“We looked up and water was coming in,” Committee Member Diane Jurgaitis recalled. “It was certainly an incentive to build a new library.” The branch’s entire fiction collection had to be removed from the shelves and covered with plastic to protect it from the elements.
Since the company that provided the 10-year warranty for the 1985 roof installation no longer was in business, the City Council was asked to declare an emergency and waive the bidding process to speed up the roof replacement.

On May 17, 1993, the Library Board met with new Mayor Thomas G. Shaughnessy, Aldermen Samuel Stillo, and Joseph Keating and Corporation Counsel Zdarsky to discuss new questions raised by the public regarding the fate of the two branch libraries if a central library were built and to address recurring Board questions regarding Illinois library law.

A *Berwyn Life* report and minutes of the meeting offered this account of the discussion:

“Noting the current branches were constructed by referendum and citing state library law that ‘the Library Board takes care of the buildings,’ Board Member Betty Wojcik said, ‘The logical assumption was the buildings were controlled by the Board.’”

“‘You are making the grand assumption those properties are yours,’ Mr. Zdarsky responded. ‘If they were purchased by the city, they are city property.’ By raising the issue, he warned, the Board might be ‘spitting into the fan.’”

The corporation counsel recalled that, at the time of the 1992 referendum, the City Council made no commitment as to whether the existing buildings would be leased or sold; and if sold, whether the proceeds would be used to abate the cost of the new construction or directed to the city or the recreation department, which owns the land on which the new library was to be built. He suggested the Board reach a decision together with the aldermanic committee and city administration.

As to Board concerns that state law specified corporate authorities are to levy at a rate sufficient to meet the budget set by library boards, Mr. Zdarsky’s opinion was that “since Berwyn is a home rule community, technically everything in Illinois library law can be pre-empted.

“Since the Library is not a separate district and Berwyn is a home rule community, the library levy is not subject to the maximum rate specified in state law,” Mr. Zdarsky said, adding, “The Board can suggest a levy, but the power of appropriations belongs to the City Council.
“Generally, through the appropriations process we decide what
our taxpayers can and can’t afford,” he added. “If you take a literal
interpretation of this ordinance, the [Library] Board could say to
the city, ‘You have no choice but to cut 14 police officers.’
Instead, the parties have sat down and come up with reasonable
interpretations. You could probably go into court and try to force
the city to levy at a particular rate, but I am not sure what a court
would do.”

Mr. Zdarsky said the city tried to levy the maximum possible
for the library on the assumption that “eventually the library could
become a separate district.” As to the amount of the current levy,
he suggested the city comptroller could furnish that information
and could provide monthly revenue and expense reports to the
library.

As to grant money, copier fees and late-book fines which
library staff traditionally deposited in outside checking accounts,
the corporation counsel said such funds “absolutely should go
through the city’s accounting department” but that the Board
should decide how they were spent. As to petty cash, the Board
could “set any policy deemed appropriate.”

Less attention was paid in the press to Counsel Zdarsky’s
views on the position of the library director. Although state library
law specified that the Board has power to hire and establish the
salary of the director, the minutes of the meeting reflect Zdarsky’s
opinion that “over the years, the library director had become a
‘department head’ and thus a member of the mayor’s cabinet, [and
as such is] evaluated annually by the mayor with input from the
City Council and Board.”

A holdover issue from the 1950s, the director’s status would
again become the center of controversy in the next century when
Alderman Michael O’Connor, the third member of the 1993 City
Council oversight committee, became mayor in 2005.

The library was in the headlines that May of 1993 for another
reason. A story in the May 21 issue of the Berwyn Life had this
startling lead-in:

“After years of being short-handed, the Berwyn Library Board
had one member too many Monday night. Georgia Nevaril-Lhotka
came to Monday’s meeting to find her seat already occupied by
new appointee Terry Lanziscero.”
In the waning days of the Lanzillotti administration, 29 appointments to various Berwyn governing boards had been placed before the City Council for approval. Many of the seats had been unoccupied for years. Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka herself had been serving without portfolio for nearly a year. Her term had expired in April 1992, but she continued to serve in compliance with long-standing Berwyn Library Board tradition and Illinois library law statements indicating that trustees may remain in place until their successors are appointed.

Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka told those in attendance at that May Board meeting that she never had been informed of her altered status either by mail or telephone. Board President Scola said she had been assured by the mayor that “the letter is in the mail.”

Mayor Lanzillotti had given no reasons when he asked the City Council to concur in Nevaril-Lhotka’s replacement. He later told a Berwyn Life reporter, “She had been there a long time, and I felt we have a need for change.”

In response, Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka told the reporter that, despite her 78 years, “I could pull my load as well as younger board members and never missed a meeting in over 30 years.” She attributed her dismissal more to politics than to age, saying she believed it stemmed from a vote she had cast while serving on the School Township 39 Board. She recalled the mayor had asked her to vote to replace the Township 39 treasurer. Instead of complying with the mayor’s request, she cast the deciding vote to retain the treasurer in office.

“A tearful [Mrs. Nevaril-] Lhotka said she thought [her dismissal] was ‘vindictive,’” the Berwyn Life reported. “Now if they build that library after all these years, I will not be here,” she said. “It really hurts.”

Nevertheless, Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka was able to continue supporting the building project as a member of the volunteer Committee for a New Berwyn Public Library. And in March 1994, she was welcomed back to the Board, reappointed to fill a vacancy by new Mayor Shaughnessy. There she remained for another 10 years, offering the voice of experience and the guidance of historical perspective gained over 40 years of service.

In that spring of 1993, Mrs. Nevaril-Lhotka was not the only library leader experiencing strained relationships. On June 9,
Director Koppe submitted a letter of resignation citing “philosophical differences with the Board.” Although Mrs. Koppe’s letter did not state a reason for her departure, she later told a *Berwyn Life* reporter she was “leaving in the best interest of the library.”

“I don’t think I could accomplish as much as in years past with the way the Board is changing things,” Director Koppe said. “I don’t think we have the same philosophy.”

One difference cited by the director involved the upkeep of the library branches. Even though the Board hoped to schedule a November referendum to gain voter approval to construct a new building, Mrs. Koppe wanted to make sure in the interim that the existing buildings “were still welcoming to patrons.”

Director Koppe cited Board reluctance to replace carpeting at the 34th Street Branch, an expenditure she said already had been approved in the 1993 capital improvement budget.

And then there were those draperies. Board members had objected that the expenditure had not been brought to them for approval and had sought a legal opinion that the Board, not the administrator, controls grant money.

Board President Scola expressed surprise at the resignation. The president described Mrs. Koppe’s feeling that the Board was “unhappy with her” as a “misconception.”

“We were trying to make everything go along with state library law and change things for the better,” President Scola told a reporter. “Some of the practices were there long before she came. We wanted to work with her to make these changes.”

Nevertheless, Director Koppe concluded, “If the library is to go ahead, it is better off without me.”

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**Lofgren Named Director Number Six**

Facing a June 23 effective date for Mrs. Koppe’s departure, the Board voted unanimously that same night to promote Mrs. Gail Lofgren from head of the South Branch Reference Department to acting director at a salary of $31,285.
The sixth director of the Berwyn Library held a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature from Rosary College in River Forest and was working toward a Master’s Degree in Library Science. After starting out as a page at the Berwyn Library, she had progressed to positions at the Morton High School and Morton College libraries. Since 1984, she had been serving as Berwyn’s reference librarian. The leadership Director Lofgren provided the library during this critical time would lead the Morton Township Women’s History Month Organization some years later to name her the recipient of its “One Special Woman Award.”

The Board, the new director and community supporters intensified efforts to assure their second attempt at a building referendum would be successful. Their efforts at building goodwill paid off in increased library usage. An average 350 people passed through the doors of each branch each day during 1993.

More than 50 volunteers of all ages and interests joined the Committee for a New Berwyn Public Library, and spokesmen expressed hope that “the little guys” would be able to win voter approval.

Meticulous in its efforts to assure that no library money was channeled into referendum efforts, the committee engaged in numerous small fundraisers. Alderman Stillo, chairman of the City Council’s library oversight committee, personally helped organize a spaghetti dinner.

Other public leaders lent their voices to the cause.

Democratic Mayor Shaughnessy and Berwyn Republican Township Committeeman Charles Slezak issued a joint communiqué endorsing a new building. Numerous community organizations voiced support, none more vigorously than the Berwyn Development Corp., which voted “overwhelmingly” to endorse the proposed building.

But fierce opposition was organizing under Berwyn resident James Tobin, chairman of National Taxpayers United of Illinois. Placing the cost of the new library at “16 million with interest, not the $7.9 million stated in the referendum,” Mr. Tobin in a letter dated October 6 asked Berwyn homeowners for donations of $25 to $50 to “help defeat this new attempt to raid your pocketbook.”

In rebuttal, Library Board members pointed out “inaccuracies, untruths and misinformation” in Mr. Tobin’s letter. They disputed
his $26 million figure, noting that Flatland, Thomas and Co., specialists in public finance, computed the total cost of the project as $7.9 million.

Of 31 letters to the editor published in the Berwyn Life regarding the referendum, only three expressed opposition. But they held clues to strong underlying negativity.

“North Berwyn will be disenfranchised of a vital asset,” said one letter writer.

“All senior citizens and individuals on fixed incomes should vote no,” said another.

“Destroying part of Janura Park is the worst idea Berwyn politicians have hatched in a very long time,” still another concluded.

On the eve of the election, a Berwyn Life editorial noted library supporters had learned from the failure of the previous referendum and had addressed the questions that led to its defeat:

“They pressed city officials to place a firm $200,000 price tag on the recreational facilities that will have to be moved to make room in Janura Park for the new library,” the newspaper noted. “They secured city commitments to use proceeds from the sale of the two existing libraries to reduce the $31 annual cost of the project to [each] taxpayer.

“Surely,” the editorial concluded, “$2.58 per month is not too much to pay for a facility educators say can enhance the quality of life for the people of the community and realtors say can add to the value of the buildings in which they live.”

Voters, however, did not follow the newspaper’s advice.
That headline in the November 5 Berwyn Life was atop the story detailing that the referendum had been defeated by 795 votes, nearly the same amount as in 1992. Voters cast 3,590 nays and 2,795 ayes in a much smaller turnout than the previous November, when 8,919 nays and 8,142 yeas were recorded.

Some attributed the loss to that low turnout, a result of voter apathy in a nonpresidential election year and a lack of contests in the North and South Berwyn School Board elections.

Others blamed “misinformation” distributed by Mr. Tobin, who rejoiced in claiming that “with little money and only 12 volunteers” his Angry Taxpayers group had succeeded in defeating the referendum.

Still others cited North Berwyn parents, alleging they campaigned against the library referendum out of fear its approval would jeopardize a grade school referendum planned for the following year.

“We are saddened Berwyn voters rejected a sorely needed community resource in the misguided effort to keep their purse strings closed,” said Board President Scola. “The people spoke, and they will have to live with it. They will still have to pay because the federal government says we have to fix up the existing libraries and make them handicapped accessible.”

The library had received an extension on the deadline for bringing its buildings into compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. The dispensation had allowed time for resolution through the building referendum. Now facing a January 26, 1994, deadline for making its existing facilities handicapped accessible, the library succeeded in obtaining one more extension.

On March 28, a public hearing was scheduled to discuss the options now open to the Library Board:

- Repairing the heating, plumbing, and air-conditioning systems at both branches and making them both handicapped accessible—Estimated cost: $2.6 million and a 15 percent reduction in space;
- Closing the 34th Street Branch and expanding the 16th Street Branch—Estimated cost: $3.4 million and a 15 percent reduction in space;
- (And despite doubts voiced by Mrs. Scola about a third try at passing a referendum) Closing both branches and building a new facility in Janura Park with plans pared down to a single story capable of future expansion—Estimated cost: $3.1 million and a 19 percent increase in space.

Fortunately for the Berwyn Public Library, a new option presented itself.

The CSA Solution

“I think I have the solution to your library problems.”

With those words, Mrs. Vera Wilt, president of CSA Fraternal Life, suggested in a telephone call to Mayor Thomas Shaughnessy that the CSA building at Harlem Avenue and Riverside Drive could be the answer to the Berwyn Library’s space problems. Noting CSA would be moving its corporate headquarters to Oakbrook in the fall of 1994, Mrs. Wilt suggested the hexagonal-shaped insurance building could be retooled for library use. And after touring the building with city and library officials, the mayor declared he was “walking on air.”

Purchase negotiations began, and the only obstacle identified by Alderman Samuel Stillo, chairman of the library’s aldermanic oversight committee, was the as-yet undetermined cost of shoring up the floors to support the weight of book stacks.

“If the cost of support columns plus the estimated $1 million price of the building exceed the cost of a new facility, the CSA purchase would not make sense,” Alderman Stillo said. “Otherwise, the CSA building is perfect for a library.” Serviced by public transportation on Harlem Avenue, the building had space on site for 50 cars plus the possibility of future access to an undeveloped lot across the street, he noted.
By July, Alderman Stillo was reporting to the Library Board that in his view the weight question had been resolved. “Preliminary studies by city engineers Frank Novotny and Associates indicate the building’s basement would require no alterations to accommodate the weight of 150 pounds per square foot that the state requires for libraries,” the Berwyn Life reported. “First and second floors would require reinforcement; bringing the total cost of acquisition and renovations to an estimated $2.6 to $2.7 million.”

Alderman Stillo suggested further cost savings might be achieved by reinforcing only the main floor and using the second floor for computers and offices. The result, he said, would be “a far better figure” than the $3.1 million needed for new construction in Janura Park or the $3.4 million needed to close the 34th Street Branch and repair and expand the 16th Street location to bring it into ADA compliance. What’s more, the alderman said, “No recreation land would be diverted to library use.”

Soon library staff and PSA architects were hard at work reconfiguring the building for service as a library. Finally, on November 9, 1994, the City Council exercised its home rule power to incur debt and authorized the mayor to negotiate and execute the purchase of 2701 S. Harlem Avenue at a price not to exceed $1.75 million. There would be no referendum. Bonds would be issued to cover the purchase.

Despite earlier opposition from two north side aldermen, the vote was unanimous, as reported in the Berwyn Life:

Alderman Sal Gambina said he still did not consider the CSA Building to be centrally located for residents of his ward on the city’s Northeast side. However, he said, “If that is what the majority of the Council chooses to do, I vote aye.”

Alderman Raymond Fron said he hated to see the 16th Street Branch closed because of its convenience for North Berwyn residents. “But if you have to choose between all libraries closed [for failure to meet federal standards] or kept open, I vote aye.”

Mayor Shaughnessy added his vote to that of the eight aldermen to “symbolize his support.”
On January 10, 1995, the purchase was completed. The Council authorized a $3 million bond issue to cover the $1.75 million purchase price, $700,000 in renovations and $70,000 in architects’ fees. The remaining funds would be used to hire state-mandated consultants, and to cover the cost of issuing bonds and paying interest plus an additional allotment for a feasibility study for a new police station.

The bond issue would be repaid over nine years and was expected to add $10 to $15 to the average homeowner’s property tax bill.

Purchase negotiations slowly bore fruit. But delays in completing CSA’s new offices in Oakbrook pushed the closing back to May 24 and then to June 27. Hopes for a September opening for the new library were postponed to late fall or early winter.

Grant Aids Reconstruction

But June brought welcome notification of a $250,000 state grant for the building’s reconstruction. Finally, on July 12, 1995, a newspaper photograph showed CSA President Wilt turning over the keys to the building to Mayor Shaughnessy, Library Board President Scola and Aldermanic Chairman Stillo.

The following month, the $713,471 renovation contract was awarded to the lowest of nine bidders, Winterset Construction of Bridgeview.

With the purchase completed, construction funding assured and contractors in place, the Library Board, staff and the Committee for a New Berwyn Public Library shifted focus to raising the $300,000 needed to furnish the building. Individual donors and community organizations were invited to furnish rooms for work or study, public meetings, or children’s activities. Bricks were sold for $100 each to create a “Pathway to Knowledge” leading to the front door.

There did not appear to be much time for such fundraising. Winterset contractors and Interplan Practice architects presented a construction schedule calling for work to start on September 26,
1990s

1995, and be completed in mid-March, 1996. Book collections were to be moved to the new building April 4 through 18 in time for a grand opening on April 19.

In December 1995, Library Board members braved snow and cold to check on progress. Armed with flashlights to inspect those rooms still lacking electric power, they tried out the elevator, inspected the lower level where new steel columns had been added to assure the floors could support the added load of heavy book stacks, and marveled at a building that housed six bathrooms instead of the single unisex facility that currently existed at each branch library. They reveled in the “openness” of a design that had enough space to triple the work area staff members currently had available.

In February 1996, Mayor Shaughnessy again toured the building with library officials to check on the reconstruction, now targeted for a May 28 grand opening.

“That’s my baby!” the mayor proclaimed at tour’s end. He was so proud of the project that he announced the City Council’s next Committee of the Whole meeting would be held in the library “so the aldermen can see how nice it is.”

On February 21, aldermen walked through 20 rooms on three floors, guided by Library Director Lofgren and Project Architect Dennis Cabala and accompanied by a Berwyn Life newspaper reporter.

“Right now you are in the children’s program area,” Director Lofgren explained at one stop on the tour. “This room is for hands-on crafts, and aldermen . . . are standing in the middle of what will be the sink where the children wash up after their projects.”

As the weeks went on, the CSA’s former basement print shop was converted into the library’s Reference Department. The first floor area that once housed the Czechoslovak Heritage Museum now was ready to harbor the Circulation and Children’s Departments as well as Adult Fiction and Readers’ Advisory services.

On April 19, Alderman Stillo introduced a motion asking the City Council to name the building that housed the Berwyn Public Library the “Thomas G. Shaughnessy Center.” Alderman Stillo said his motion was based on a recommendation from the Library Board, and although the Library Board minutes did not mention
such action, the City Council unanimously approved the designation.

With the branch libraries due to shut their doors on April 27, staff members assisted by adult volunteers and local Scout troops held close-out sales of books and furnishings. To further facilitate the move, patrons were asked to check out books between April 22 and 26 and hold them until the new facility opened.

Once again the opening was pushed back, this time to June 3, to await the tardy delivery of doors and hardware and completion of the time-consuming task of merging the collections of two branch libraries into a single facility.

A decade later, retired Administrative Assistant Carol Shotola and current Administrative Assistant Barbara Ziemba still vividly recalled the stress of that move.

“It was May and hotter than blazes,” Mrs. Shotola recalled. “We sat on the floor, working on cardboard boxes because we had no chairs or desks. The boxes contained all the administration files, and it seemed every time you wanted a file it was always in the box you were working on, and you had to take everything off the top of the box in order to get at it.” Mrs. Ziemba had brought a typing table from the former 34th Street Branch so she could pay the library’s bills and keep up with other accounting work, and Mrs. Shotola confessed to coveting that table.

The old heating, ventilating, and air conditioning system had not been replaced when the building was purchased, the women recalled, so there was no air conditioning to relieve the heat. Nor was fresh air available since the windows did not open. While the Director and Board lobbied City Hall for the money to replace the HVAC system, the women survived with another Barbara Ziemba idea—small desk fans brought from home.

Administrative office workers did not have the worst of it, the women agreed. Because book collections often had been divided between two buildings, weeding out duplications proved a voluminous task for the Children’s Reference and Fiction Departments.

“They had to weed the collections and consolidate them as they were shelving them in the new building,” Mrs. Shotola recalled. Pages and volunteers could help shelve books, but only trained staff members could determine what to keep and what to discard.
It was exhausting work,” she said. “Moving company workers rolled the books in on carts. Then library workers had to quickly unload them because the movers needed the carts for the next load. It was a tough move, but we were so happy to be here that everyone pitched in to help, tired or not.”

Thank-you for Donors

By May 30, the library was ready to hold a thank-you reception and preview tour for donors whose contributions helped furnish the building.

Some items had been hunted down by staff members. Antique theater seats in the audio/visual area were found by Director Lofgren in a shop in Peoria. A full-sized knight in shining armor symbolically protected the library entrance.

But many of the furnishings, and in some cases entire rooms, were underwritten by organizations such as the Berwyn Woman’s Club, Kiwanis Club of Berwyn, and Berwyn Masonic Lodge No. 839. Individual patrons also made contributions, and in the case of the late Mr. Ernest Dardwin even made sure through his estate that support for the library would continue after his death.

On entering the building that May evening, each donor received a map guiding them to the individual piece of furniture or entire room equipped through their contributions. Tours culminated in a dedication ceremony at which Mayor Shaughnessy, Alderman Stillo, and Director Lofgren were honored for their leadership in obtaining the library’s new home.

Finally on June 10, 1996, the delays were over. Library and city officials gathered on the front steps to cut the ribbon and open the doors on a new chapter in the library’s history. After years on the move and numerous divisions of services, the library possessed a single, central, permanent home.

So many people came to the opening day of the library that Director Lofgren told the Berwyn Life she feared for a time that all of the 20,000 books patrons had checked out to reduce the moving load were about to be returned in a single day. A total of 7,300 materials were returned in the first two days. Some 2,500 items
were checked out—one-third of the combined monthly average for the library’s former two branches—all within two days.

“We hope every resident will go and see what their tax dollars have achieved,” editorialized the *Berwyn Life*. “We certainly believe they got their $3 million worth and more.”

Participating in the June 10, 1996, grand opening of the Berwyn Library at 2701 S. Harlem Avenue are (front row from left) Ann Marrone and Doris Remp, Library Board members; Mayor Thomas Shaughnessy; Rosemary Scola, Board president; Georgia Lhotka, Board member; and Alderman (and future Mayor) Michael O’Connor, member of the library’s aldermanic oversight committee; and (second row) Betty Wojcik, director of the Berwyn Development Corporation and former Library Board member; Alderman Sam Stillo, oversight committee chairman; and Mary Mastny and Diane Callahan-Mastny, Board members. (Photo courtesy Berwyn Public Library)

**New Chapter on Unity**

Patrons approaching the library via the Pathway to Knowledge walkway found three floors of service waiting for them. With a total of 33,000 square feet, a single floor of the new building was
Throughout the library there was a feeling of light and openness, an effect Director Lofgren said had been created by removing walls that had divided the building into the small offices required by CSA.

The goal of the staff was to make the library “user friendly,” Director Lofgren said. The ceiling of the Youth Services area depicted a tropical rain forest and the room contained furniture molded in the forms of animals that might live in that forest. The Young Adults Room featured a fireplace and a cassette storage unit invitingly shaped like a jukebox.

There was a large meeting room on the second floor available to community organizations, smaller rooms for patrons needing to use typewriters and computers, and even a small gift shop near the building entrance intended to be manned by the Friends of the Library volunteers as a steady fundraiser for the library.

In its March 1997 issue, the *Illinois Municipal Review* applauded the decision by Interplan Practice to save as much of the interior as possible rather than gutting the three-story hexagonal-shaped building. This was accomplished, the review noted, by:

- Creating openings in existing masonry walls to allow different library spaces to flow into one another;
- Locating the Reference Department, which has the heaviest weight loads, on the ground floor to limit additional reinforcement for library stacks on upper levels;
- Keeping the original mechanical and lighting systems;
- Relocating the entrance so that patrons arriving by car in the parking lot behind the building would not have to walk around to the front.

In another tribute, the building was declared a winner in the 1996 Keeping Berwyn Beautiful Contest co-sponsored by the *Berwyn Life*, the City of Berwyn and the All Berwyn Committee. But more than a building, a library is a public service and the new facility had plenty to offer.
Patrons could access library catalog and reference services via computer in appropriate sections throughout the building, and the Children’s/Young Adult section also had multimedia computer work stations.

For the first time patrons could be offered access to the Internet through staff intermediaries. Patrons no longer had to make audio/visual selections from a list of titles and then ask to have the videos brought to them by staff members. Now AV materials were on open display for people to peruse.

“We now had a Board Room, a Community Room, a Children’s Program Room where people could meet,” Mrs. Ziemba recalled. “We used to have to hold programs out in the middle of the floor with people walking in and out.”

“We have always had a really nice collection,” Director Lofgren said. “But because it was divided between two buildings no one ever really saw it before. Now, thanks to a new facility they will.”

But as with any new occupancy, there also were problems.

After only six months in the new building, the roof over the Community Room sprang a leak. Blisters were discovered, and the roof was judged to be beyond patching. The City Council allocated $60,000 for roof replacement in its 1997 capital improvement budget, and the work was completed in October.

January saw a further expansion of services as lap-sit story times were introduced so that parents and children ages 12 to 24 months could share special moments related to reading. Puppets became the newest checkout materials.

“Before we moved into the new building, we averaged about 10,000 to 13,000 books circulated per month,” Director Lofgren recalled. “Now our regular monthly circulation is 25,000 to 35,000. In February, we had over 2,000 calls to the Reference Department for information.”

By November 1997, the library was asking to increase its 1998 budget by $200,000 to cover these expanding services. However, the city had a $1 million deficit and was asking each department to cut budgets rather than increase them.

To help pick up the slack, Mrs. Lofgren personally poured salt on the parking lot and cleaned graffiti from the elevator. It was a hands-on tradition harking back to the days when Mrs. Polivka
climbed up on the roof to patch the leaks, and Mr. Korbel built shelves for books.

In 1996, the former CSA Fraternal Life building at 2701 S. Harlem Avenue becomes the home of a single centralized library facility. (Photo courtesy Berwyn Public Library)

1990s Bestsellers

Scarlett: The Sequel to Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind • Alexandra Ripley
The Bridges of Madison County • Robert James Waller
The Chamber • John Grisham*
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets • J.K. Rowling

*Editor's Note: Grisham's novels headed the best sellers 1994–2000
After 34 years in the library field, 26 of them devoted to the Berwyn Public Library, Mrs. Lofgren retired on June 29, 2001. As library director for her last five years of service, she had guided Board and staff to fulfillment of the long-held dream of a single, centralized facility.

Mrs. Kathleen Behrendt, Director of Youth Services, took over as interim Library Director but chose not to seek the top administrative spot, saying she was eager to return to her first love—serving the children of Berwyn.

After interviewing 11 candidates, the Board on October 23 obtained City Council concurrence to hire Bill Hensley as director at an annual salary of $45,000-plus. Both library and city officials said they were impressed with Mr. Hensley’s background in business as well as library work.

Possessing a Master of Arts degree in Library Science from the University of Chicago and a Bachelor of Arts and 30 hours of graduate work in sociology from Wichita State University, Mr. Hensley had broad library experience. He had served as director of the Kankakee Library, serial librarian for John Crerar Library, special projects librarian for Charles Merriam Center Library, associate librarian of the Central YMCA College and public services librarian and library media technology instructor with Southwest College. He also had combined service as librarian and English teacher at Chaplain Kapaun Memorial High School in Wichita.

Mr. Hensley’s business background included work as database maintenance module contractor at Lucent Technologies in Lisle, project and records management at Litton Enterprise Solutions in
Naperville and service as assistant director of finance for the Mayor’s Office of Employment and Training in Chicago.

The new director came on board as the nation, still reeling from the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, was beset by fear and suspicion of anything even remotely Arabic.

A day or two before Director Hensley’s arrival, an incident occurred in which an uneasy patron summoned the North Riverside police because two “Arabic-looking” gentlemen were in the Berwyn Library looking at maps of the North Riverside Shopping Center. Thus, one of the new director’s first tasks was to reaffirm the Berwyn Library’s support for a patron’s right to confidentiality.

“The prying nature of certain Patriot Act2 provisions sparked a firm affirmation of patron privacy by the American Library Association and policy reviews by libraries across the country,” Director Hensley later explained. “The Berwyn Library had come down on the side of confidentiality and any invasion of privacy would be a violation of our library’s mission.

“Unless the police come with a subpoena, we cannot provide them with any information about our patrons,” the director said. “We can’t even use a patron’s registration card for a mailing list unless we get the patron’s permission.”

To further protect privacy, it was decided following the map inspection incident that Internet usage records were to be purged at the end of the day with the shredding of logs that record patron signup for computer timeslots.

The library tried to be similarly protective of the patron’s right to freely surf the Internet, the Director recalled. City officials sought to install Internet content filtering software on all city computers, which collided with the American Library Association’s advocacy of patrons’ First Amendment rights to freely access even potentially pornographic material. A compromise was reached when the Berwyn Library installed filters at the server level on all computers, but an adult patron could ask to bypass the filtering system.

2 The Patriot Act of 2001 expanded the authority of U.S. law enforcement agencies to search records including e-mail communications. One of its most controversial sections related to the right to access library records. Wikipedia.
When Director Hensley arrived that fall of 2001, the library was abuzz with preparations for celebrating its 75th anniversary. The three-week observance, October 29 through November 17, was designed to “get all of Berwyn reading and talking about books. Charlotte’s Web by E. B. White was chosen as the commemorative anniversary book in recognition of its universal appeal to children and adults. More than 100 copies were given as gifts, and a performance of Charlotte’s Web: The Musical was presented in the Berwyn Public Safety Building.

Bill Hensley, Director, 2001–Present. (Photo courtesy Berwyn Public Library)

Space Reconfigurations

It did not take long for the new Director to spot the difficulties involved in converting a building constructed for a national insurance company into a library.

“I could not believe there was so much wasted space in the processing area, and I wanted to make major space changes,” Mr. Hensley later recalled. “We used hallway space to create storage, enclose three offices and set up a technical support area with printer, fax, and copying machines.”

It was the first of many building reconfigurations designed to address the changing technological and service missions of 21st century libraries in general and the Berwyn Library in particular.

By February 2002, for example, it was apparent the Readers’ Advisory Department, full-service since the year 2000, was starved for space. The Friends of the Library Gift Shoppe located just inside the library entrance was seen as the answer. Down to four hours of service per week because of a shortage of volunteers and
lack of public interest, the shop was no longer a viable source of revenue for the library. The Board conceded the space could be better utilized for Readers’ Advisory staff and materials, and the little shop that had opened with such high hopes in 1996 closed its doors.

That October of 2001, the library initiated a new service with staff members taking to the road to deliver books and other materials to residents homebound by disabilities.

By 2002, many Berwyn residents wanted to travel a different avenue to learning—the Internet highway—and the library staff began planning a huge expansion in technology services.

The second-floor computer room that patrons had used primarily for word processing now would be retooled to provide direct patron access to the Internet, a service previously available only at two terminals in the library or through a staff intermediary at departmental service desks. The room’s typewriters, once hailed as a great advance in public services, were with only one exception sent into storage.

At the same time, computers were set up in the Reference Department for patrons wishing to pursue online job searches and applications. Then, recognizing that even grandparents wanted to become part of the technological revolution, the department designated a computer “for seniors only.” The desire to communicate with grandchildren via e-mail and check on stock holdings and investments proved so great that the service soon expanded into a senior center where staff members could assist those wishing to learn computer and Internet skills.

Meanwhile, another revolution was in progress as patrons increasingly turned to videos rather than books for entertainment. When video circulation exceeded books, a group of Library Board members led by Dr. Margaret Otto began to question whether videos were an appropriate part of the library’s mission. In December 2003, Dr. Otto asked the staff to draft a rental fee policy
for fiction videos and also to investigate the possibility of opening the library on Sundays.

The Sunday opening proposal was welcomed by the public, but, by the time the video rental fee policy was ready for review at the March 2004 Board meeting, more than 25 patrons came to protest. Still more signed petitions opposing the fee.

The policy proposal sparked intense debate among the Board members themselves. Some trustees saw the imposition of a video rental fee as a way of directing the public’s attention back to the value of reading books. Others supported the prevailing staff view that the fee was a contravention of Illinois State Library policies calling for free access to library materials. Still other trustees cited the precedent of a subscriber fee briefly charged some years earlier to help finance the initial development of the video collection. All conceded the fee could produce much-needed revenue for the library, and, faced with the prospect of additional library budget cuts because of the city’s growing deficit, the Board by a 5–3 vote imposed a charge of $1 per fiction video for a trial period of one year.

When a draft of the new policy was presented to the Board the following month for ratification, it immediately was amended on its face to waive the fee for children’s educational videos. Staff members pointed out that a large portion of children’s fiction videos have educational value, and Dr. Otto later noted it was never the Board’s intent to charge for educational materials but exclusively for fiction movies.

Nevertheless, the new policy proved difficult for patrons to grasp and resulted in a 75 percent drop in children’s video circulation in the first month. As promised, the Board reviewed the policy a year later. A motion to rescind the fee was rejected 5–2.

The split votes were indicative of the breach that the video debate had opened between the Board and staff and among the Board members themselves. It would prove difficult to repair.

Adding to the tension was the fact that, although the City Council approved the new fee, it did not stave off a 5 percent cut in the library’s 2004 operating budget. Nor did it result in an immediate increase in library resources, since video revenues were deposited in the city’s corporate fund rather than library accounts.
It was not until September 2005 that the Board received confirmation that the video fees were being credited to the library. The video fees would remain a topic of debate as Board and staff tried to balance the need for some $35,000 in annual video fee revenue against the ideal of free public access to library services. It is an issue Director Hensley believes eventually may become moot as Berwyn follows the lead of other libraries in offering per-view videos and CDs over its website as an alternative to check-out service.

In May 2004, the City of Berwyn completed the purchase of a triangular lot on Riverside Drive across the street from the library, land long sought to relieve parking congestion in the library’s adjacent lot and on neighborhood streets. That fall, city workers made a curb cut and poured gravel for a “temporary” parking surface. However, without money available to complete the project, the lot remained unfinished for another two years. It took a turnover in city administration before a delegation of Berwyn officials led by new Mayor Michael O’Connor traveled to Springfield to seek help with the much-needed paving, lighting, and landscaping. There, through the offices of State Rep. Robert S. Molaro, they were able to obtain a $300,000 grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to complete the 60-car lot.

Strategizing the Future

Another long-term effort on the Library’s agenda was completed in June 2004—a five-year strategic plan. Developed with the assistance of the Executive Service Corps of Chicago, the plan called for enhancing buildings and grounds, improving patron services, expanding community support, and building staff-board-government relations. However, committees to implement the plan were not established until after Board elections were held tardily in November and Dr. Otto became president.

The strategic plan resurrected the old debate about the relative value of a municipal library with an appointed board operating under the protective arm of the city versus an independent library
district with an elected board and a voter-established tax rate sufficient to support library services. The plan suggested incremental steps that could lead to a voter referendum on the issue. However, after studying the pros and cons with the help of Philip Lenzini, a legal advisor to the Illinois State Library and Metropolitan Library System, the Board in December 2005 tabled the proposal indefinitely with the option that some future Board might wish to reconsider the matter.

The 2005 budget year followed the customary pattern of funding cutbacks and stalemated plans. The City Council in March cut the 2005 library budget for new books, reference and databases by $45,195 and audiovisuals by $20,400. Because of the cuts, the library was unable to allocate 12 percent of its budget for new acquisitions as required by the state. So as not to jeopardize the Berwyn Library’s eligibility for state grants, the Metropolitan Library System advised returning to the 12 percent level as soon as economically possible.

Also struck from the budget was a line item to reinstate the position of outreach director. Outreach responsibilities had been redistributed among a library staff that already had been reduced 165 service hours below the previous year through budget cuts and a city hiring freeze. To achieve greater flexibility among remaining staff members, Director Hensley began cross-training personnel to serve in more than one department. Coupled with customer service training and a newly created staff morale committee, the approach was designed to assure patrons courteous and professional attention despite shortages in personnel.

With a “can-do” spirit, on January 9, 2005, the short-staffed library launched the long-desired Sunday hours, opening for the first time from 1 to 5 P.M. on Sundays. It was some weeks before patrons caught on to the new hours, but by March 9 nearly 240 people were coming to the library during those four hours of Sunday service.

Daily as well as Sunday patrons found a more efficient circulation service waiting to serve them. By redesigning the Circulation Department workroom, traffic flow was improved at the main service desk. In addition, Readers’ Advisory and Youth Services desks were relocated to make them more visible to patrons.
In June 2005, the Library Journal featured Berwyn as an example of services that can be offered in middle-income communities. Oak Park was profiled as a provider at the high end of the economic spectrum, Robbins at the low income range.

“The Berwyn Public Library . . . is no showpiece,” the Journal concluded, “[but] it is certainly a community resource—and its circulation, given the budget and space available, is healthy.”

Expanding Technology

Demonstrating its value as a community resource, the library in October 2005 responded to patrons’ growing appetite for computer access by embarking on yet another expansion in technology services. Orders were placed for 13 new personal computers that offered patrons direct Internet access and the use of Microsoft Office applications. To make room for the new equipment, periodicals were moved down to a quiet reading area on the lower level adjacent to the Reference Department. Into the open space on the second floor went rows of computer tables and chairs and a joint service desk for the newly merged Computer and Audio/Visual Department. The former computer and typing room was retooled as a technology classroom for use by community organizations as well as library staff.

The library’s exterior appearance also was changing. Morton West High School horticultural students under the direction of Instructor Clinton Zellmer and Board President Otto cleared underbrush along the railroad right-of-way behind the building and spruced up the library grounds. President Otto then recruited staff and community volunteers to plant and maintain window boxes and flower beds, a project that evolved into a permanent Library Garden Club.

Just as alterations were taking place in the library’s physical arrangements, its relationships with various governing authorities were in transition as well.

In June 2005, the library’s aldermanic oversight committee was eliminated during the reorganization of City Council committees that followed the near sweep of city offices in the March elections.
by Mayor O’Connor and his Independent Voters of Berwyn Party. It was replaced by a single library liaison—Alderman Nona Chapman, a former Library Board member and aldermanic oversight committee chair.

Winds of change were rocking the Library Board as well. Director Hensley wanted Board members to become more proactive. “It did not seem right to me that it was solely the director making decisions,” Mr. Hensley would later recall. “There needed to be more collaboration.” He encouraged the trustees to participate in Metropolitan Library System training sessions to prepare for a more active role.

Director Hensley found some ready sympathizers in a contingency of new members led by President Otto. Others seemed content in a more traditional “leave it to Bill” role, relying on the director to intercede for them with city officials, patrons, and staff.

Board tensions escalated as President Otto tried to resuscitate the dormant committee system, and in November the frustrated president, whose appointment had ended in August, left the Board.

That leave-taking focused attention on the Board’s long-time practice of encouraging members whose terms had expired to continue to serve while waiting for a successor to be named. This unwritten understanding had developed as a way short-handed Boards could cope with recurring appointment droughts—months and sometimes years when certain city administrations seemed unable to find willing volunteers.

Noting the practice was not spelled out in Berwyn Library Board bylaws, Otto called it into question. Since her term had expired, Otto said she no longer had status as a member of the Board, and could not continue to participate in meetings she felt she “had no right to attend” but for which she would be legally responsible.

Dr. Otto later said that, if the law had stated trustees “must” serve, she certainly would have complied with the law.

“The word ‘may’ gets to the crux of the matter,” Director Hensley noted, “and I am certain a battalion of attorneys could debate the matter.”
For the Berwyn Library Board the debate was over. At a special meeting on November 30, the trustees elected Mrs. Patricia Zank to fill the presidential vacancy.

Notwithstanding, the year 2005 ended on a positive note. Repeatedly tight budgets had led to an aggressive outreach for outside funding by director and staff. The effort paid off in more than $138,000 in state per capita grants and other financial support. Throughout 2005, the Board had sought a way to cut through the lengthy and expensive red tape needed to create a foundation to handle a wide variety of donations including corporate gifts. In January 2006, the Board discovered that, since the library already possessed 170(c) 3 fund status as a unit of local government, it was not necessary to establish a separate foundation. All that was needed was to send an application to the Illinois Library Systems Directors Organization (ILSDO) to serve as the pass-through agency for donations such as corporate matching funds. ILSDO would receive the money and then remit it to the Berwyn Library. The new Foundation Account was opened in June and later was renamed the Library Board Fund.

To oversee the new fund and other library accounts, the Board re-established the dormant office of treasurer and unanimously elected Member Phyllis Walden as its occupant. With the addition of new Member Deborah Cullen, the Board now had a core group committed to obtaining ongoing training through the Metropolitan Library System and regularly scheduled guest speakers to prepare for a more active role in library governance. Unfortunately, this new activism came too late to offset strained relations that had developed between the library director and the new city administration.

City-Library Issues Resurface

Once again in April 2006, city and library officials had occasion to review the unclear boundaries of their relative authority under state law. The problem arose when Mayor O’Connor informed Library Director Hensley that he would not be reappointed when his contract expired on April 25.
As Board, staff and aldermen began rallying around the director and patrons began circulating petitions on Mr. Hensley’s behalf, the mayor asked to meet with the Library Board. Six Board members; Aldermanic Library Liaison Chapman, Aldermen Joel Erickson and Michael Phelan, two staff members, and one resident attended that April 12 meeting of the Board’s Policy and Personnel Committee.

Mayor O’Connor told those assembled that he had a dual purpose for the meeting: First to make sure the committee had copies of personnel evaluation forms currently used by the city so the Board could select a format most suitable for its annual evaluation of the library director. Secondly, to inform the Board that he had notified Director Hensley of nonrenewal of contract.

Responding to a question from the audience, Mayor O’Connor declined to explain his decision to fire Mr. Hensley but said he would present his reasons to the City Council on April 25. President Zank said the Board would take the mayor’s comments under advisement.

Five days later, the Board conducted a closed session review of the director and found his performance to be “exceptional.” Then, in open session, the seven members present unanimously voted to reappoint Director Hensley until May 10, 2009. Mindful of the potential for debate between Board and mayor over their relative powers of appointment under state law, the Board authorized expenditures of up to $750 for the services of an attorney if needed. The mayor and City Council were informed by letter of the Board’s decision.

On April 25, Library Board members, patrons, and staff crowded into City Council chambers to support Director Hensley’s cause. According to Berwyn Life newspaper reports, petitions signed by nearly 300 residents were presented to city officials, and former Board President Otto and former Board Member Lucile Evans “spoke highly” of the Director:

“Mr. Hensley knows his job, he does his job and he truly cares about the people he serves,” Dr. Otto said. “He has shown the foresight to persistently update the library so it will continue to serve, with excellence, the people of Berwyn. Bill even gives his time unselfishly to support many volunteer programs that certainly help in these times of financial constraints.”
Mrs. Evans, who had served on the search committee when Director Hensley was hired, told those present, “We chose Bill because we felt his qualifications best met the job requirements. In the last five years, Bill has done a marvelous job as director.”

With mayor and aldermen already at odds regarding their own respective lines of authority over city appointments, Library Liaison Chapman was able to round up the votes needed to request that Berwyn ordinances be changed to conform to state library law. They were thus to affirm in writing that the power to hire and fire the library director belonged to the Berwyn Library Board and not the mayor.

No public explanation of the attempted dismissal was offered at that Council meeting, but the following month Mayor O’Connor came to the Library Board meeting and in closed session explained his issues with Hensley. The discussion ended with the mayor saying he did not plan a legal challenge to the Board’s employment authority under state law and with Board President Zank affirming the Board’s desire “for all to work cooperatively.”

Once again, city and library appeared to have avoided a freefall into legal battle over their relative lines of authority.

Central Library Marks Tenth Year

Library Board and staff refocused their attention on the library’s upcoming 10th anniversary at the Harlem Avenue location. On June 10, 2006, the library celebrated the anniversary jointly with the kickoff for its summer reading program. In keeping with the reading program’s animal theme, newcomers to the library were introduced to the location of services throughout the building by following a Winnie the Pooh trail.

City officials and longtime library supporters were honored at the rededication ceremonies and open house. Mayor O’Connor addressed the crowd, hailing 10 years of progress, and former Mayor Shaughnessy dropped by to check on “his baby,” the Shaughnessy Center in which the library is housed.

Director Hensley traced for the audience the history of the land beneath their feet beginning with its days as a part of the Ritzma
family farm that in the late 1860s extended from Pulaski to Harlem Avenues and Cermak Road to Ogden Avenue. The City of Chicago later purchased a portion of the land stretching from Harlem to Home Avenues and Cermak Road to 26th Street and operated it as Gage Farm, a tree nursery for municipal landscaping projects.

When Chicago began selling off portions of Gage Farm for commercial and residential development, the triangular bit of land bounded by Harlem Avenue, Riverside Drive and the tracks of what is now the Canadian National Railroad was offered in 1947 to the Berwyn Post, American Legion. To mark their new post home, Legion members erected flag poles that remain a focus for patriotic observances to this day.

In a 1996 Berwyn Life interview, Legion Post member George Boucek described the comfort he and other veterans derived from the preservation of those flag poles. As judge advocate for the Berwyn Legion Post, Boucek handled the sale of the property to CSA and recalled feeling “a terrible loss” when watching the demolition of a post home he said was “intended to stay for a century to accommodate the needs of the veterans organizations in the area.” Boucek took consolation in CSA’s promise that the Legion’s flag poles would remain and that post members would have permission to use them for patriotic observances. In 1995, as a member and general counsel of CSA, Boucek again handled the sale of the building, this time to the city of Berwyn for use as a library. Once again he negotiated a comforting promise that patriotic ceremonies would continue at that location.

“The Legion’s preamble speaks of ‘obligation to community, state, and nation,’” Boucek told the Berwyn Life. “As a public library, the property is furthering the needs of the community.”

How well those needs were met was detailed in a chart developed by the library’s new Archives Committee to trace achievements during the first decade at 2701 S. Harlem Avenue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>142,594</td>
<td>169,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio/visuals</td>
<td>3,785</td>
<td>9,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers for patron use</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflecting later on those 10 years, Director Hensley recalled that, when the newly centralized library opened in 1996, staff members were excited to be able to offer patrons collection information via computers rather than referring them to tiers and tiers of card catalog boxes jammed with 3- by 5-inch cards. They were pleased that patrons finally had access to the Internet through a staff intermediary and could be offered a choice of typewriters or computers for writing letters and composing resumes.

In the decade that followed that 1996 opening, Mr. Hensley noted that a revolution in information technology had led to a quadrupling of computers available to Berwyn Library patrons. New services included computer instruction and access to the Internet directly by the individual patron rather than through an intermediary. By the end of the decade, patrons were able to research reference questions through specialized databases subscribed to by the library and available not only through computers in the Harlem Avenue building but online from home, school, or office through the library’s website.

The library also began planning to use new technology such as digitization to preserve local history. Aging documents such as old telephone directories, anniversary issues of community newspapers, and City Council minutes were to be digitally converted into a web-accessible database linked to the library’s website.

Despite all the technological advances, the library never lost its people-centered focus, Director Hensley said.

A Teen Board was organized to plan activities and programs to capture the attention of teen-agers and draw them into the library. A Senior Center was established in the Reference Department with computers reserved for older citizens and staff available to help them navigate computer codes and the Internet.

For a generation seemingly always in a hurry, the library offered a “Holds without Hassle” service in which additional copies of books in great demand were rented temporarily to eliminate long waits for bestsellers.

For those with a more leisurely lifestyle, the Periodical Department introduced free “coffee and the newspaper” socials. Initially offered in 2004 as a “first Friday of the month” activity, the socials proved so popular that they soon expanded into a
regular Friday get-together. The following year a senior club was introduced with older residents gathering in the Community Room on alternate Wednesdays to play games and socialize.

As in the past, the library was responsive to changes in the city’s ethnic population. Between 1996 and 2006, the Berwyn Library increased its Spanish-language collection from virtually zero to 1,643 adult and 1,527 juvenile books, both fiction and nonfiction, 602 adult and juvenile audio/visual items, plus newspapers, periodicals, and databases. Promotional flyers were printed in Spanish as well as English, and the library staff began searching for programming that would appeal to its new constituency. An English as a Second Language book club lasted only from January through May 2006, faltering because of a lack of funding for book sets and disruptions from young children who frequently accompanied parents to the book discussions. However, the staff learned from the experiment and began offering programs that could be enjoyed by all members of the family.

But this positive growth also had a negative side. Expanding collections crowded into the few remaining open spaces and impeded logical service flow. The building began to show its age, and parts often proved no longer available to repair heating, ventilating, air conditioning, and other support systems dating back to the building’s birth in 1974.

Nor could staff or patrons be certain of the roof over their heads. On New Year’s Day 2005, two roof drains separated and brought down ceiling tiles over the audio/visual department desk, closing down the department for the first week of the year. It was the harbinger of many leaks to come until funding to replace the roof finally was obtained nearly two years later.

The roof was just one example pointing the Library Board toward proactive planning. As the anniversary year wore on, the Board coalesced around an executive committee leading the way through improved parliamentary procedures and organizational structure to a more active role in budgeting, monitoring, and long-range planning for an as yet uncertain future.

“In this rapidly changing 21st century, no one can say with certainty what lies ahead for the Berwyn Public Library,” Hensley concluded. “The one thing our patrons can count on is the
commitment of our Board and staff to serving our residents’ needs.”

**2000s BESTSELLERS**

*Desecration* • Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye  
*The Da Vinci Code* • Dan Brown  
*For One More Day* • Mitch Albom  
*A Thousand Splendid Suns* • Khaled Hossenini

*EDITOR’S NOTE: While the library certainly has continued to make history since the June 10, 2006, celebration of 10 years at the Harlem Avenue location, the editors have chosen to end this document with that observance so as to allow sufficient time to put recent events into proper perspective.*
Acknowledgments

This history is the product of the volunteer Archives Committee, comprised of current and former members of the staff and governing board of the Berwyn Public Library. Staff membership includes Bill Hensley, Library Director; Mary Frank, head of the Reference Department and staff liaison to the Archives Committee; Carol Shotola, retired administrative assistant; and Barbara Ziemba, current administrative assistant. Board representation includes Ann Marrone and Eileen Pech, current Board members, and Phyllis Walden, former Board member.

Craig Schumacher, head of Technical Services, Berwyn Public Library, was in charge of online production assisted by volunteer Nina Stifel. Board Member Jerome Pohlen was editor for the print edition.

Advisors to the Committee include Gail Lofgren, retired director; and Tammy Clausen, current head of Outreach Services, Berwyn Public Library; Board Members Doris Remp, and Louise Sommese; and volunteers Henry Pech and Michelle and Rhonda Ziemba.

The Committee wishes to thank all those who participated in this project and apologizes for anyone inadvertently overlooked. We are especially indebted to the Berwyn City Clerk’s Office and the Library’s Reference Department for their assistance.
Historical Resources

Archives of the Berwyn Public Library.

Newspapers—Berwyn Beacon, (now a copyright belonging to the Berwyn Historical Society); Berwyn Events, Berwyn Tribune, Berwyn Life-Beacon and the Berwyn Life (now Life Newspaper, GateHouse Media Suburban Newspapers).


Other publications—Berwyn Past-Times, a publication of the Berwyn Historical Society, Spring 1996; Historic Berwyn, Historic Publications, Inc. of Westmont, 2000 (a publication based on Berwyn Historical Society materials); Illinois Municipal Review, March 1997; Library Journal, June 2005; and It’s a NOLD Story by Don Nold.

Scholarly papers by—James Chlipala, a library science student at Dominican University in River Forest, 2004; and Gladys Jolidon Rohde, a graduate student at the University of Southern California, 1951.
Appendix I:

Berwyn Library Location
Time Line

Early Years as Private Lending Libraries

1894

The wives of early Berwyn leaders meet in the home of Mrs. Arthur MacNeal, wife of the founder of MacNeal Hospital, to form a small rental library. They first lend books out of the home of Charles E. Piper, co-founder of Berwyn, at:

3427 Oak Park Avenue

As interest in the rental library grows, the women persuade Mr. Francis Lackey to provide space for their library in his dry goods store at the:

Southwest corner of Windsor Avenue and Elliott Avenue (now Grove Avenue)

But within a few years, circulation exceeds the time and space Mr. Lackey can devote to the books, and the collection is turned over to Emerson School.

1922

The Berwyn Woman’s Club starts a library for children in the:

Cloakroom of the Community Club House in the Masonic Temple’s southern wing
3112 Oak Park Avenue
History of the Berwyn Public Library

by City Council ordinance—November 18, 1924

1925
The Board of the new tax-supported Berwyn Public Library rents space in:

**The Berwyn Club**
33rd Street and Oak Park Avenue

1926
The Berwyn Club building is sold, and the library moves to:
**The former Barnhart & Co. Real Estate Co. building**
2214–16 Oak Park Avenue

1929–30
Due to rapid growth, the library moves out of the Barnhart building and opens branches. A Central Branch opens in a storefront at:

**6910 Cermak Road**

A South Branch opens first at:
**3204 Grove Avenue**

and then moves to:

**3118 Oak Park Avenue**

A North Branch opens in a Havlicek School portable classroom building:

**Elmwood Avenue and 15th Street**

1931
The North Branch moves to a storefront at:

**6405½ W. 16th Street**

1932
The Central Branch moves across the street to:

**6909 Cermak Road**

1933
The South Branch moves almost to the very spot where it had started in a dry goods store nearly 30 years earlier. It occupies:

**The second floor of the former Murphy Building**

6828 Windsor Avenue
1938
The Central Branch moves to a spot a few feet from the former real estate building at:

2208 Oak Park Avenue

1939
The Central Branch moves into the new Berwyn City Hall at:

6720 W. 26th Street

1947
The North Branch expands by leasing a second adjacent storefront and takes the address:

6409 W. 16th Street

1955
The North Branch rents new quarters at:

6421 W. 16th Street

1961
Following a successful 1960 referendum, the library for the first time moves into new buildings planned and constructed for library use. A South Branch at:

3400 Oak Park Avenue

A North Branch at:

6420 W. 16th Street

The Central Branch continues in City Hall until closing in 1982.

1996
After two failed attempts to pass a referendum to construct a new facility, the library moves into a single, central facility in the renovated CSA headquarters at:

2701 S. Harlem Avenue
Appendix II:

Berwyn Library Pioneers

Pioneering Private Libraries

1894

A small lending library is formed by a group of Berwyn pioneers including:
- Mrs. M. M. Hitchcock
- Mrs. Arthur MacNeal
- Mrs. Charles Piper
- Mrs. William Porter
When the lending library disbands, the books are turned over to Emerson School.

1922

A children’s library is started by Berwyn Woman’s Club volunteers directed by:
- Frances Fox
- Miss Neisler
- Mrs. Lester Orr

Petitioners for a Public Library

1924

The Berwyn Woman’s Club organizes a public library petition drive with the Berwyn Improvement Association,
the South Berwyn Improvement Club and other organizations. The Woman’s Club Committee includes:

- Mrs. G. W. Ashby
- Mrs. Edward Bares
- Mrs. O. J. Deschauer
- Mrs. F. B. Hall
- Mrs. M. M. Hitchcock
- Mrs. Arthur MacNeal
- Mrs. G. M. Merwin
- Mrs. J. O’Donnell
- Mrs. Lester Orr
- Mrs. H. A. Sellen
- Mrs. Chipman Skeels

First Berwyn Public Library Board

1925

Following creation of the tax-supported Berwyn Public Library, Mayor Frank Janda appoints the first Library Board consisting of:

- Frederick L. Dole, President
- Mrs. Chipman Skeels, Vice President (and later President)
- Mrs. O. J. Deschauer
- Mrs. Mae Lafferty
- Mr. J. F. Lanka
- Mrs. Lester Orr
- Mr. Karel Marsicek
- Mr. James Pavek
- Dr. L. Stolfa
Appendix III:

Berwyn Library Directors

Margaret Ely 1926–1957
Jane (Belon) Shaw 1957–1959
Emily Polivka 1959–1983
Albert Korbel 1983–1989
M. Kathleen Koppe 1989–1993
Gail Lofgren 1993–2001
Bill Hensley 2001–