



Yukon Public Libraries History

Did you know that there have been libraries in the Yukon since Gold Rush days? During the Klondike Gold Rush, there were reading rooms in tents and log buildings in Conrad and Grand Forks. Free or subscription-based, they were in various facilities including a church and a saloon, and provided much needed reading matter to miners headed for the Klondike.

Dawson City

In Dawson City, a small commercial library was open on the waterfront in 1897/1898, established by S. Hall Young, “the mushing parson”, with some 1500 hundred books purchased by the Forty Mile Prospectors. Originally located in a tent, it soon moved into the Arctic Commercial Company Building and by 1899 into quarters at Second Avenue and Queen Street under the name Standard Operating Library.

With over 1100 volumes, and subscriptions of \$1.00/month, it was owned first by Dr. Grant and then by Dr. McDonald. In 1903, it was a prosperous undertaking with proprietor William Horkan providing board games, writing tables, mining resources and other enticements along with the Standard Library Restaurant serving 800 meals daily and a saloon. Rooms for 100 were also available for the night and the advertising promoted “books, board, beds, bath and bar”, arguably the way to meet all the needs of a weary miner. The Standard Library Restaurant & Hotel continued operating until 1904 when it was no longer viable due to the development of a free library service.

The first free public reading room was located at Gandolfo’s Point on the northeast corner of Front and Harper Streets in 1901, organized by the Dawson Free Library Association to provide a place for miners in from the creeks to read and write letters at no cost.

A grant of \$25,000 funding from the well-known American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie plus city and territorial assistance enabled construction of the Carnegie Library on Queen Street between 3rd and 4th Avenues. The Carnegie Library opened in 1904 with over 5000 books and at the time was considered the most elaborate building in Dawson City. In 1920, due to water and other damage from a major fire, the library moved out of the building and into borrowed space in the public school where it operated at a much reduced level reflecting a drastic decline in Dawson’s population. The Carnegie Library remained empty until 1934 when it was sold to the Freemasons.

By the mid 1950s, a committee of the I.O.D.E. (International Order of Daughters of the Empire) had formed to revive the library. Finding a suitable building was problematic until the territorial government formed the regional library and made available space in the storeroom of the liquor store. The library occupied this space until the late 1980s when a new K-12 school was planned to include a joint school-public library. The library opened in the school in 1991 and operates there to this day.



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Whitehorse

The first library in Whitehorse was in St. Andrew's United Church, a union of Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists. It was in existence by 1907, and listed in Polk's Directory 1909/1910 as the "Free Public Library White Horse Y.T." along with the Carnegie Library, Dawson, Y.T. In 1907, the Whitehorse Free Library consisted of two glass-cased cupboards housing a very few books and was run by Harold Nelson with some funding from the Yukon Council. It is reputed that many letters to family outside were headed "White Horse Free Reading Room".

By 1914, a proposal had come forward from the Yukon Chapter of the I.O.D.E. to operate the library if they could use the old Whitehorse General Hospital building at Second Avenue and Elliot St. which was vacated when the new hospital was built.

The territorial government provided funding to include quarters for a library and a public reading room. The library was officially opened on November 11, 1916 by Commissioner George Black. Members of the I.O.D.E. served as volunteer librarians.

The library operated out of this space until 1943 when the I.O.D.E. canteen and meeting rooms in the building, while being used by American troops constructing the Alaska Highway, were destroyed by fire. The insurance settlement of \$4000 was paid to the territorial government and held in trust for a new library building.

In the interim, the library operated out of the Indian Day School building adjacent to the Anglican Church from 1943 to 1946, and in the old Legion Hall from 1946 to 1959. With plans to build a depot to service libraries throughout Yukon underway by the late 1950s, approval was received to include Whitehorse Public Library in a combined building using the insurance settlement to guarantee public library space. The new building on Wood Street opened on February 21, 1961 and included a designated "Martha Louise Black Reading Room" with furnishings from the former government house in Dawson City and mementos from the late Mrs. Black's estate.

In 1965 a new building was constructed at 2nd and Hansen Streets to house both the regional headquarters and Whitehorse Public Library at a cost of \$168,000. This Centennial project was officially opened on January 28, 1966 by Commissioner G.R. Cameron. Service is provided from the location to this day, with an expansion to accommodate a growing Yukon Archives in 1972, and a major expansion and renovation in the early 1990s when Yukon Archives moved to its new building adjacent to Yukon College.

Other Public Libraries in Yukon and Yukon Regional Library

In 1905, the territorial government supported libraries in Whitehorse and Dawson City. In 1907 additional funding was provided for materials for a law library and in 1909 a grant supported the Conrad Free Reading Room. By 1914, funding was also provided to the Carcross Free Reading Room. Support to Mayo was added in 1917 for the Mayo Circulating Library. Expanded services were available when it opened on September 28, 1936 as the Mayo Reading Room under sponsorship from the I.O.D.E. Through the 1930s and 1940s, the territorial government continued to provide funding to Dawson City, Whitehorse and Mayo as well as the Yukon Law Library.



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In 1954, the Elsa Library opened with funding from United Keno Hill Mines. Subsidiary branches of the Elsa Library were located in Calumet and Carmacks. In 1963, the Elsa Library joined the Yukon Regional Library. It continued to operate until the late 1980s when the town was vacated with the closure of the mine.

By the 1950s, there were plans afoot to establish a territory-wide library system. In 1954, the Commissioner of the Yukon, F.H. Collins, consulted with the Superintendent of the B.C. Public Library Commission on a regional library. This led to a survey of libraries in the Yukon conducted by Northern Affairs and National Resources Canada in 1958 that recommended that the territorial government assume responsibility for Whitehorse Public Library from the I.O.D.E. as well as act as a central depot and distribution centre for both school and public library materials. Multi-media resources were an early component of the collections, with Audio-visual Services operating as a separate unit until the 1990s.

By 1963, the territorial government had assumed full responsibility for all public libraries in the Yukon and the Yukon Regional Library was fully underway. The concept was to centralize systems and de-centralise access to collections, programmes and services in order to provide library service throughout Yukon.

Libraries were at that time in existence in Mayo, Elsa, Dawson City, Carcross and Whitehorse (including Tahkini Branch), and new libraries were established in Watson Lake and Haines Junction. With a rapidly expanding regional library system in place, service was also offered in Carmacks, Teslin, Swift River, Brooks Brook, Keno, Beaver Creek and Destruction Bay within the first year; Canyon Creek, Champagne and Carcross followed. Considerable work was needed to establish and bring all the libraries up to standard.

The first regional librarian was Bette Colyer who can take credit for the library system we see today. She traveled everywhere in Yukon and across its borders to promote and organize libraries. When Mrs. Colyer left in 1966 after 5 years, she was replaced by Garth Graham who turned the system into a modern library service operating as the Library Services Branch. By 1972, there were libraries in Mayo, Dawson City, Faro, Watson Lake, Haines Junction, Elsa and Keno as well as Whitehorse and deposit stations in a number of other communities.

In 1978, the Library Services Branch became the Department of Library and Information Services and was reorganized to separate archival and record management services from library services to the public and schools. For a short period it operated as Information Services in the Department of Government Services. In 1982 the Library Services Branch joined the Department of Heritage and Cultural Resources, alongside Yukon Archives.

By this time, library branches were in place in Dawson City, Elsa, Faro, Haines Junction, Mayo, Teslin, Watson Lake and Whitehorse. Volunteer community libraries or bookstations (for smaller communities) were operated in Carcross, Carmacks, Destruction Bay, Old Crow, Pelly Crossing, Ross River, Takhini and Teslin. In addition, Beaver Creek, Burwash Landing and Keno City were provided with paperback service and service was provided to the Tungsten Library.

Libraries continued in the Department of Heritage and Culture through several name changes in the early 1980s, and then in a major government re-organisation in early 1984 were assigned to the Department of Education.

Community libraries (as they were by then called) were available in 8 locations outside of Whitehorse by the mid 1980s – Carcross, Carmacks, Dawson City, Faro, Haines Junction, Mayo, Teslin and Watson Lake. In



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1990, Ross River joined the group, and in 1999, Beaver Creek, Burwash Landing, Old Crow, Pelly Crossing and Tagish were upgraded to community libraries from volunteer branches.

The early 1990s saw the first technological advances with the conversion of library collections to automated formats and the production of the first electronic catalogue, on the CD-ROM technology of the day. By mid decade, there were computers everywhere and keeping up with technology was a significant issue. Many processes were done electronically and Internet access was available in some locations. Funding from Industry Canada's Community Access Programme and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation enabled Internet access in all Yukon libraries by 1999. While access in the early years was through expensive dial-up, high speed access has been in place for a number of years enabling Yukoners to enjoy the benefits of connectivity while enjoying a Yukon lifestyle.

During this time library collections grew and programmes expanded. A writer in residence programme was established, French, Northern and literacy collections and services were implemented, new media formats were incorporated into the collection, and a range of programmes for all ages including summer reading programmes and story times for children were encouraged. Community libraries became established as central meeting points and a comfortable safe place to relax in.

Another whole scale re-organisation in 2002, as part of the government's Renewal process, severed libraries from Yukon Archives and placed them in the Department of Community Services, first in the Service Yukon Branch and in 2004 as the Public Libraries Branch of the Community Development Division. Libraries continued to grow and develop as they operated within the Community Services mandate.