Early Spearfish: Never Without Books

Spearfish’s 19th century history is rich with authentic adventures and characters of the old American West. The community was founded illegally in 1876 in country set aside for the Lakota people, and early residents included gold rushers, farmers who devised a sophisticated system for irrigating Spearfish Valley, and Texas cattlemen who drove herds north to graze on nutritious Dakota short grasses. Whatever stereotypes we may concoct for frontier adventurers, there’s evidence all settler population segments carted books across the prairies with them.

Rebecca Pettigrew Evans, Spearfish’s first teacher in 1877, certainly brought books. So did Fayette Cook, first president of the school that would become Black Hills State University. He arrived by stagecoach in 1885 from Minnesota where, he recalled, “I bought the largest trunk I could find and packed it nearly full of reference, text, and teachers and professional books.”

Early accounts of Spearfish life make mention of book clubs and book exchanges. Yet there was no true public library for nearly 70 years after the town’s founding. The college Fayette Cook established was largely the reason. Sometimes Spearfish sat back and let its state-supported school provide certain amenities rather than funding them itself. When it came to books the college seemed more than happy to cooperate and even loaned volumes to a Main Street store for check-out, from 1913 to 1918. The college library was lost in a 1925 fire and librarian Maud Russell Carter rebuilt the collection in part with books donated by Spearfish residents. That further cemented the bond between the college and local reading public.

Spearfish enjoyed a short-lived Works Progress Administration library service in the 1930s, based in a vacated railroad building that stood where today’s downtown fire station is. By that time the community was home to Grace Balloch, and it is likely she was already thinking of a more substantial and permanent community library.
The Remarkable Life of Grace Balloch

Grace Balloch wore lots of professional hats, but had someone asked who she was in her heart, there’s little doubt she would have answered “teacher.” There are still a handful of Spearfish people who recall her as a local college English professor and registrar long ago. In Grace’s thinking education meant more than presenting information or guiding students toward it. It also meant encouraging young people to believe themselves worthy and then helping them find necessary resources – including financial ones.

The late Evelyn Heinbaugh, one of Grace’s students and later longtime publisher of Spearfish’s weekly newspaper, would always admire her teacher’s knowledge, patience, sincerity and love of life. “Mrs. Balloch had courage that was self-sacrificing,” Evelyn wrote.

Born Grace Herr Frantz at Waynesboro, Pennsylvania in 1878, the future teacher graduated from Pennsylvania’s Millersville State Normal School. Millersville’s original mission was preparing educators. Shortly after graduation Grace was running her own private school just outside Washington, DC, in Montgomery County, Maryland. There she met Archibald Balloch, geologist and cattle buyer, and Grace’s life changed dramatically. The couple married in 1902 and decided they should relocate “out West” where the cattle industry flourished — St. Louis and later Chicago.
Grace worked as a librarian at the University of Chicago and taught at Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights, where she won a reputation among students as a powerful mentor. She took special interest in pupils needing encouragement in hard times, as was the case with 16 year old Walter Hoeppner in 1916. His mother died during surgery that year and, he later recalled, "I am convinced her death was due to incompetence of the surgeon...this was one factor that persuaded me to study medicine." Walter had no money for higher education, but Grace helped him figure out ways to win scholarships and work his way through school at the University of Chicago and its affiliate, Rush Medical College. It's almost certain the Ballochs paid some of his fees, as well. Walter went on to enjoy a long medical career in the Chicago area and would always consider Grace his foster mother.

As Walter wondered whether a career in medicine might be within his reach, Americans wondered whether Walter's generation would fight in the World War then raging in Europe and other regions. In April, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson announced the United States would, indeed, send troops abroad. In France they would face some of the harshest conditions in wartime history, encountering poison gases fashioned into weaponry, and fighting from trenches where disease could kill just as ruthlessly as German bullets.

Grace told her husband she was sailing to France to support American boys in the trenches. She knew that the YMCA needed volunteers to staff canteens and "huts" near the front lines. These were places of shelter and refreshment, yet YMCA documents make clear that it saw its mission in France as much more than respite. Soldiers needed contact with people of strong character who could help them make sense of a world where they regularly watched friends die, and where it was easy to stop believing in God and the better instincts of humanity. In late summer, 1918, Grace boarded a transport ship and finally saw the French coastline after a voyage through remarkably stormy weather. Archibald, meanwhile, was off to Virginia, where he supervised loading military equipment aboard ships.

In the war zone, Grace later recalled, "it was easy to keep the boys' morale up during the fighting. They knew what they wanted, what they were fighting for, and that the sooner it was
over they could return home. But after the war the let-down was terrific." The Armistice ending combat was signed November 11, 1918, but soldiers soon learned there was plenty of mop-up work for them in Europe.

Certainly Grace's happiest day in France came when she met up with her foster son, Walter, a soldier serving as a medic. She came to love France and its people and even opened a bank account there, certain she and Archibald would come back to visit.

Did Grace and other YMCA volunteers make a difference in France? Back home, some Americans scoffed at the program. But today, in Spearfish, yellowed letters that Grace kept the rest of her life attest that for some soldiers her presence was perhaps life-changing.

"I sure am proud to have two friends such as you and Miss LeRoy, and being with you is when I feel my best," wrote soldier Tom Johnson from a post at a French stone quarry, three days before Christmas, 1918. "I assure you I will try and return your many good traits."

Grace spent that Christmas at a military hospital, writing letters from wounded soldiers to loved ones back in the States. Reminding soldiers to write home, it seems, was something she repeated like a mantra.

She kept a copy of this poem by an anonymous soldier who, among other things, appreciated those reminders to write:

When he wants to write a letter
(And you know that he had better)
To his mother, or his father, or the girl,
Or he's feeling sort of lonely
And the thing he craves is only
An oasis in the racket and the whirl
Or he yearns for conversation
Or the glad exhilaration
Of a dish of ice-cream or piece of custard pie,
He will hurry helter-skelter
To the YMCA shelter
Hereinafter to be spoken as the "Y."

By spring Grace had completed her YMCA work and applied to work a few months more in France, helping noted historian
Ray Stannard Baker document the war. A close friend of
Woodrow Wilson, Baker had been the President’s eyes and ears in
wartime France and his press secretary when the Treaty of Ver-
sailles was signed. Grace was selected as part of Baker’s team, and
there’s no doubt that this team’s extensive work contributed to
Baker winning the Pulitzer Prize for an eight-volume biography
of President Wilson.

Finally it was time for Grace to return to America, and the
soldiers she trained to write letters continued writing her for
years. But their letters found Grace not in Chicago, but the Black
Hills. Photos dated 1920 show Grace and Archibald with horses
on a ranch near Custer. At the same time Archibald was helping

Her World War I adventures behind her, Grace and husband Archibald moved
to the Black Hills and briefly lived on a ranch with horses. With a pen, one of
the Ballochs indicated the town of Custer lay three miles through the forest.

build the first roads through Custer State Park. In 1923 Grace
taught summer English classes at the college in Spearfish and was
offered a full time position there that fall. Spearfish would be the
Ballochs’ home for the rest of their lives.

They never made that trip to France. Archibald died in 1934.
Five years after that another world war engulfed Europe. In 1940,
at Spearfish, Grace learned of Paris falling to the Nazis and real-
ized, to her horror, that the Nazis had seized her French bank savings (about $150) for their own purposes. She told a reporter that most French citizens valued freedom and their own form of government and would “gladly die for their cause. It is horrible that a few ambitious traitors and blood-thirsty dictators can bring so much misery and destruction to the backbone of the French nation.”

This time Grace was in no condition to contribute to the war effort. She learned she was terminally ill at age 63, and she set her sights on solving a local problem. She would nudge Spearfish towards development of a public library. She wrote in her will: “To the City of Spearfish, to be used as a nucleus for a city library, I give and bequeath all my books, and I request that a committee be appointed by the Mayor of the City of Spearfish to take charge of this bequest.”

Happy to know that France had been liberated from the Nazis, Grace died in November, 1944. She and Archibald are buried at Spearfish’s Rose Hill Cemetery.
A Beginning

Probably Grace understood that her gift to Spearfish would be somewhat difficult for municipal leaders, who had no space for her books (more than a thousand of them) and no budget for library operations. Initially the city council declined the donation. But as was true for Grace everywhere, she had touched Spearfish lives profoundly and left behind loyal friends. In early 1945 city voters, by a 240–94 margin, demanded that city funds be directed toward a library they thought should be called Grace Balloch Memorial. Russell Jonas, college president, said the books could be stored at his school until a library opened.

Meanwhile, members of the library committee that Grace requested were Millicent Heidepriem, Florence Bettleheim, and Frances Repass. Frances, Spearfish High School teacher/librarian and later a librarian at Black Hills State, would chair Grace Balloch Memorial Library’s board for decades. In the spring of 1945 she organized volunteers who gathered at 7:30 several evenings to classify and catalogue books. In addition to Grace’s collection, original book donors included the Bennet family, Florence Bettleheim, Willard Cain, John Haas, Millicent Heidepriem, Josef Meier, Frances Repass, Frances Woods, Kappa Delta Pi, and the Whitewood Women’s Club. By late June, 800 of about 1,500 books were catalogued and ready for check out.

It’s hard to imagine a more modest library than the first version to bear Grace’s name. It was a ten by thirty foot room in Tom and Margaret Cutter’s Spearfish Hotel (southwest corner of the Main and Hudson intersection, where Ace Hardware stands today). Walls were knotty pine, many of the shelves were planks on bricks, and a tiny second room in the back served as an office. Hours were 2–5 most afternoons and an unpaid staff of volunteers provided all services the first year. Between opening day, June 23, 1945, and June 1, 1946, 270 people acquired library cards and borrowed 2,106 books. Membership and gifts brought in $460.57 in revenue and fines added another $17.53. Room rent, furniture, and utilities were the major expenses, and $63.26 was spent on book acquisitions. On June 1, 1946 the bank balance and cash on hand totaled $94.35. That date was significant because it marked when Grace Balloch Memorial Library became
tax-supported, receiving a first-time appropriation of $1,000 from the city. It was possible, because of that, to hire a paid librarian who would begin work July 1, 1946.

The Evelyn Hesseltine Years: 1946 – 1966

Grace Balloch’s friend and colleague, Evelyn Hesseltine, taught college mathematics in Spearfish for 31 years. After the 1945 - 46 term she retired, traveled to Colorado for a brief visit, then returned to Spearfish to begin a second career as librarian. Always genial, she seemed to possess an instinct for knowing what her regular patrons might want. Library hours remained 2 – 5 every afternoon except Sundays. Evelyn experimented with Tuesday evening hours for a while, then dropped the idea after spending many of those evenings mostly by herself. Her mathematics background served the library well as she established a solid budgeting system and kept meticulous figures reflecting loans and membership growth. In her first year membership grew to 470 and books checked out jumped to 5,648. Her board decided that with city dollars now part of the budget, people living within city limits would be granted free library cards and those residing outside Spearfish would pay one dollar annually per household.

Most books Grace and others had donated to the collection were for adults. Evelyn knew families with children hoped to see more juvenile titles and she worked successfully to stock her shelves with such titles.

“We belong to only one book club and I select the books we buy,” she explained a few years into her tenure. “We have no periodicals since the place is too small for us to have a reading room.”

Of course, as Evelyn added book titles space became tighter still. Grace Balloch Memorial Library celebrated its tenth anniversary in June, 1955, with about 3,700 titles in its collection. Over the first decade 82,832 books had been loaned.

After 1959 Spearfish readers anticipated not only more space someday, but a sparkling new library building. That year Grace Balloch’s sister, Anna Herr Frantz, died. Although she lived in
Pennsylvania, she had taken ownership of Grace’s Spearfish home in 1944 and now her will bequeathed the property – close to downtown – to the city for a library site. “This is a splendid site and a wonderful gift to the community,” said Frances Repass.

Everyone knew, though, that coming up with construction funds would take time. Meanwhile the library would have to move to temporary quarters to handle its growing traffic. On the afternoon of June 20, 1961, patrons lined up to check out 123 books – a single day record. The hotel’s ownership was preparing to remodel the building and told the library board that it hoped space could be found soon. As it turned out, Evelyn and her board didn’t have to look far. Art Sullivan offered the ground floor of his insurance building on the same block as the hotel, where the Wells Fargo drive-through lanes are now. On February 28, 1962 Pratt’s Dray and Storage and volunteers moved shelving, furniture, and about 5,000 books into the new Grace Balloch Memorial Library. It remained a small library even though floor space had just about tripled.

Exactly 20 years after she started, Evelyn retired as librarian on June 30, 1966. In those years she had more than tripled the book collection despite very limited acquisition funds. “Miss Hesseltine expected all the books in the library to be accounted for,” noted her successor, Edythe Edwards Wood. “She would go to a great length to recover a late or lost book, for she knew the loss of one book was a tragedy for a small collection.”

By retirement day, Evelyn had loaned about a quarter million books, and she wasn’t quite through. Later, well into her eighties, she would walk from her home to the library, load books into four shopping bags, then call for a taxi to take her and the books to the Dorsett retirement center where she had established a little auxiliary service for residents unable to come downtown.
Prior to becoming Spearfish's librarian, Edythe Edwards Wood enjoyed a career as a teacher in small, western South Dakota schools. Those rural settings may be where she developed a belief that it was important to take time to know patrons personally, so as to be in a good position to recommend books. In addition to that quality, she believed librarians had to have a
sense of trust. "You're loaning books all the time," she said, "and you must have faith that you will get them back."

In the Sullivan building she had room — barely — to initiate a Saturday morning "live story hour" for pre-school and kindergarten children in autumn, 1967. "Mothers may leave their children at the library and take off for a cup of coffee, and return for their children at the appointed hour," advised the Queen City Mail, Spearfish's weekly newspaper. For story time Edythe enlisted the talents of Black Hills State teacher Louise Smock and Louise's Recreational Leadership class. Louise's students brought stories to life by using puppets and other props.

That same fall Spearfish hosted the annual convention of the South Dakota Library Association. Five Spearfish authors whose books were popular at the library were honored: Mar Gretta Cocking, Thomas Odell, George Pummel, Frank Thomson, and Nancy Veglahn. A highlight of the convention was the presentation of the association's Trustee Award to Frances Repass, in recognition of her leadership on the Grace Balloch Memorial Library board.

In 1968 Edythe announced the library was acquiring large-print publications for those with visual impairments, plus a tape player for patrons who could best access their reading material by audio. The tape player was a harbinger of new library technology on the horizon. Within six years Grace Balloch patrons would be able to check out a variety of audio systems as well as a movie projector.

What defined Edythe's 16 years at the library, though, was planning and then moving into the library building that took form on Grace Balloch's home site, the northwest corner of the Main and Kansas intersection. The city of Spearfish began levying funds for construction in 1960, and putting gifts and overdue book fines into the library coffers, as well. By mid 1968 city dollars for the project totaled $39,490. Carol Henry, who served on the library board for more than 20 years, recalled that Frances Repass "knew how to get money out of the federal government." Frances worked with city leaders to apply for a grant of about $60,000 under the federal Library Services and Construction Act. When the grant came through, it was time to get to work. Economic inflation was a concern and the city would appropriate another $10,000 to cover rising costs.
The first week of January, 1969, Grace’s old home was demolished. In June Ainsworth Construction of Spearfish submitted a successful bid to lead construction as general contractor. Work on the single story, block and brick building—41 feet by 101 feet—began that fall. The library stood finished by mid-summer, 1970, but Spearfish people could only look at it in anticipation for several months. There were problems finding proper furnishings, and later more difficulties in getting furnishings shipped. Meanwhile, Frances Repass was proving not only could she get money out of the federal government, but county government, as well. In July, 1970, she appeared before the Lawrence County Commission on behalf of the four public libraries in the county (Spearfish, Deadwood, Lead and Whitewood). She asked for a one-half mill levy to be assessed, “thus providing equitable funds and services for all residents of Lawrence County.” Central to the request was ensuring free library services for students who lived beyond city limits. “Modern school curriculums are based not on individual texts, but on the use of all types of media,” Frances told commissioners. She added: “All children are entitled to adequate library service.” Commissioners agreed and the first funds were apportioned among the libraries the next year. Lawrence County’s financial support would increase over the years so that it eventually became Grace Balloch Memorial Library’s prime funding source.

After the furnishing problems were resolved, Boy Scouts provided most of the muscle to move 7,000 books from the old li-
brary to the new. Doors opened to the public on January 27, 1971. Edythe reported that library activity increased instantly and dramatically. Book checkouts went from about 30 per day to 100. Library cards issued would shortly hit the 1,500 mark. The new building featured a gallery for artists to show their work, room for dozens of children to attend story time, and a meeting area for community use named the Frances Repass Friendship Room.

This third version of Grace Balloch Memorial Library was dedicated on June 27, 1971, with Mayor Don Young officiating. Don had known Grace when he was a college student at Black Hills and, in fact, had received a much-needed loan from her in those years when typhoid left him with huge medical bills. Evelyn Hesseltine came to the dedication to greet old friends and pour punch.

Edythe noted the building had been designed for 17,750 books, or 10,000 more than what were currently in the collection. With an acquisitions budget of less than $1,000 annually, she hoped Spearfish readers would make book donations as they had in the past to fill the shelves.

Hours at the new library were 9 am – 8 pm Monday through Thursday, 9 am – 5 pm Friday, and 1 pm – 5 pm Saturday. Edythe, Grace Sparrow, Lucile Good, and Linda Klumb made up the building's original staff, along with custodian Ed Buzalsky. As the 1970s progressed Elaine Perry and Helen Smythe joined the staff for service lasting many years.

In 1974 Spearfish again hosted the South Dakota Library Association convention. The Grace Balloch Memorial staff joined forces with the local high school and college library staffs to coordinate much of the activity, which included remarks by U.S. Senator George McGovern and future Senator Larry Pressler.

In 1979 the Library Association named Edythe South Dakota’s Librarian of the Year. She retired three years later on December 31, 1982. As she had hoped in 1971, the community had filled the shelves, with about 18,000 books in the collection on the day she locked the doors for the last time.
Elaine Perry, right, was librarian for 17 years. She was photographed with staff members Inge Popelka, Kathy Follette, Kathy Klumb and Kathy Albers.

**The Elaine Perry Years, 1983 – 2000**

Elaine Perry discovered libraries as a child in Yankton, South Dakota. “We had a Carnegie library,” she recalled, “and I couldn’t live without books and libraries. I was part of a children’s summer reading program back when we not only read books, but had to report on them.”

As an adult, after living in Spearfish a few years, she took a ten-hour-a-week position at Grace Balloch Memorial Library in 1975. “I learned a tremendous amount of library skills working with Edythe, all the fundamentals and how to handle the patrons,” Elaine said. “She told us not to assume that everyone knew the Dewey Decimal System, and if they didn’t, to walk people to the books they wanted.”

Intrigued by the work, Elaine obtained a library minor from Black Hills State. She became head librarian when Edythe retired and remained in the position for the next 17 years.
“During all of those years I had a good staff,” she noted. “All of us took books to shut-ins throughout town. Kathy Follette and Kathy Klumb had phenomenal memories, Kathy Follette especially for what the patrons wanted, and Kathy Klumb for all the books we had. Gail Gannon was often the last one out of the building, after working overtime to finish whatever we had to have done. In addition to everything else, we were the school library for nearby Central Elementary.”

A summer reading program for children (no book reports required) drew wide interest. Late in summer a throng of kids would line up outside the library before it opened to collect prizes for their reading prowess. “We didn’t emphasize that they had to read a lot,” Elaine remembered, “but if they would read something, they’d earn a prize.” Weekly story times for younger children continued.

On Saturdays in winter the library drew crowds of adults for “cracker barrel” sessions, where state legislators answered constituents’ questions. When the issue was adequate funding for education, former Spearfish legislator Jim Hood remembered, lots of people would show up. Proposed legislation to legalize gambling in Deadwood, in 1989, was another topic that stirred tremendous interest in Spearfish and the rest of Lawrence County.

In an entirely different frame of mind, adults made their way to the library for a popular Mystery Readers Club, organized by Kathy Follette. “If the club was reading a British mystery,” said Elaine, “Kathy might have tea and scones for them when they came for the book discussion.”

In 1985 a nonprofit organization destined to reap great benefits formed: Friends of Grace Balloch Memorial Library. Articles of Incorporation were signed by South Dakota Secretary of State Alice Kundert on May 16 of that year, after the Hood and Nies law firm of Spearfish donated time and expertise. By-laws stated: “Friends of the Library have a common concern for their library’s active expansion and participation in community lives. They have a conviction that good library service is important to everyone. The activities of the organization may include the raising of funds for equipment, materials, and other needs of the library which are beyond the command of the City of Spearfish; and the sponsoring of culturally enriching community programs, such as talks, exhibits, films, story hours, etc., all free and open to the public.”
First officers for the organization were Doris Phillips, president; Edythe Wood, secretary; and Dale Sander, treasurer. Dale, a CPA, contributed his professional skills as the organization accepted donations and bequeaths.

Volunteer Bob Fanning proved invaluable when the first computers arrived at the library in the late 1980s. “The first ones were just for cataloging books,” Elaine said, “and Bob did a lot of that out in the public area because we had no office space for him. It was amazing how fast cataloging became compared to the days when we did it by typewriter. The state wanted all the larger libraries in South Dakota, and that included us, to be on the South Dakota Library Network. The statewide network was coordinated from Black Hills State, so they’d come over and try out things on us first. The network made interlibrary loans much easier.”

The 1971 library building still felt new when it became apparent that it was too small. It had been designed for a community of 6,000 people. In the 1980s, booming Spearfish left that population figure in the dust. Nobody on staff had a desk to herself, and books waiting to be catalogued were typically stacked under the shared desks. Carol Henry said the board considered a building expansion, and hoped Main Street property to the north might become available. But the property’s owner didn’t want to sell.

Perhaps the one public building in town that was even more crowded than the library was City Hall on Main Street. “So a new City Hall was planned and the library came in on its coattails,” explained Elaine. “I think city leaders understood our overcrowding, too, and we had federal funds available to us;” (as in 1968, Library Services and Construction Act dollars). The firm Architecture by Thurston designed one of the region’s most distinctive municipal services buildings, combining city council chamber, city offices, police department, and library.

Fred Romkema, mayor at the time, remembered wide community support for the library. “It was probably the least controversial aspect of the entire structure,” he said. Judy Larson, serving on the city council then, recalled that leaders knew making the library part of the municipal building would mean “that the city would facilitate the funding of utilities. The library needed more dollars and this was a way to free up dollars.”
The library merited prime, first floor space – about 11,000 square feet. Ainsworth-Benning Construction began building on Fifth Street in 1994. The entire structure’s cost, including land acquisition, would total $4,550,000. The Spearfish Chamber of Commerce agreed to purchase the former library for $160,000. Contributing greatly to the planning was the library board of trustees, comprised of Herb Aslesen, Penny Capp, Carol Henry, Judith Larson, Bryan McGroarty, and Linda Meyer.

"After the building was started I would walk over every day and look at the progress," Elaine recalled. "It looked huge."

There was one painful aspect to the move. There would be no printed card catalogue at the new site. The time had come to discard the old cards, so carefully typed and maintained over the decades, but no one on staff had the heart to do it. The disposal task fell to board member Penny Capp, and it was hard for her, too.

This time 33,000 books would be moved. Bob Fanning coordinated moving day, November 11, 1995, involving nearly 100 volunteers. Many of them showed up with pickups. Books were transported in borrowed recycling bins. Bob’s planning made it

This team of volunteers jumped into action the morning of November 11, 1995, and moved 33,000 books into the fourth location for Grace Balloch Memorial Library in just a couple hours.
so books came into the building and were placed immediately onto the proper shelves.

"In fact, Bob was so organized that we had the move done in two hours," said Elaine. "We expected it to take most of the day and the Friends of the Library prepared a soup luncheon for the volunteers. But by lunchtime most had gone home."

Eight days later Mayor Fred Romkema led a dedication ceremony for the municipal services building. Afterwards, for the first time, the public saw the inside of the warm, beautifully lit library. It featured areas for periodicals, children's books and activities, and computers, as well as rooms for meetings, audio, and South Dakota history resources. Driving from North Carolina to attend the dedication was Walter Hoeppner, Jr., son of Grace Balloch's foster son, along with his wife, Vivian.

More shelf space made it possible for the library to accept a large collection of baseball histories, player biographies, and fiction, donated by Dick Ruddell. Dick, a longtime Spearfish resident who served on the city council as the municipal services building took form, was a former baseball umpire at minor league, college, and amateur levels.

In 1996 the South Dakota Library Association came to Spearfish again for its convention. A highlight was Grace Balloch Memorial Library board member Herb Asleson being named the state's Trustee of the Year. Herb served on the board for about 30 years.
The Sharon Henry Years, 2000 – 2008

In Spearfish Sharon Henry found adult readers to be "eclectic, a mix of retired Black Hills State University educators, hobbyists, collectors, and very serious readers. In Spearfish, when we'd put a seven day limit on a book because it was a new best-seller, that was no problem for serious readers, who would often return the book in just two or three days."

Getting to know adult readers was Sharon's first order of business when she accepted the library director's position in 2000. Most of her career had been in children's library work. Sharon grew up in Hawaii, earned her Masters of Library and Information Science degree at the University of South Florida, and first worked in libraries in Florida schools. After relocating to the Black Hills with her family, she did school library work in Sturgis and Rapid City, as well as at Rapid City Regional Hospital's library. She first accepted a summer position at Grace Balloch Memorial and, she recalled, "enjoyed it immensely, especially getting to know Spearfish's people."
She took the library director’s position in 2000 in somewhat unusual fashion, combining it with the children’s librarian job. She continued story time and the summer reading program, and took special interest in reaching young reluctant readers.

Computer technology took big steps forward as the Bill and Melinda Gates Library Foundation came through with an entirely revamped system that included new hardware, software, and firewall system. “It was a fabulous thing,” Sharon recalled. “It was a huge thing because everything became standardized – before that each computer was a different model. The foundation had really thought things through and came back later to upgrade software and, later, the hardware. The Friends of the Library deserved credit, too, because they provided match funding.”

The Foundation computers had to be for public use, but staff soon had new technology, as well. Governor Bill Janklow was committed to top-grade statewide computer access in many fields, and his office coordinated shipment of six computers to Grace Balloch Memorial Library.

Sharon learned that Spearfish’s summer visitors were part of the public she served, too. “In the days before laptops were common, they’d come in to use our computers, but some of them would stay for other things, too. Some were interested in genealogy or would spend time in our history room. Lots of them commented on what a beautiful library we have. Bikers, especially, left big tips in the donation bottles.”

Mary Lou Worman and Myrna Sorenson were valued library staff members, as were library veterans Kathy Klumb and Kathy Follette. Additionally, volunteers proved vital to daily operations.

Spearfish mourned the loss of a caring friend when Kathy Follette passed away in 2007. “She represented everything a librarian should be,” said Sharon. Immediately Kathy’s colleagues knew how they wanted to memorialize the founder of the Mystery Readers Club. Combining her memorial money and that of Mattie McVey, teacher and library patron, they created the Mystery Room. Interior decorator Cheryl Shinabarger, donating her time, designed the room with dark wood furniture, rugs, and big overstuffed chairs. While many of the volumes on the shelves deal with murder and danger, there’s not a cozier spot in Spearfish to relax with a book.
Into the Future

“It seems that people are expecting more of their library rather than using us less,” said Grace Balloch Memorial director Amber Wilde in 2010. That year was the library’s sixty-fifth.

Amber spoke at a time when many of her patrons carried laptops that allowed them to tap data from most any location, and when some print resources faced uncertain futures. “So,” she added, “we’ve had to broaden our formats and information services. We’re not just a collection of books anymore.”

As more and more readers grew comfortable experiencing books on e-readers, Amber explored how libraries might be able to offer books in that form by subscription. In 2010 the acquisitions budget was $40,000, and Amber and the board considered how those dollars should be divided between hardcover volumes, periodical subscriptions, and electronic resources. As always, ideas from patrons were appreciated, as were donated materials.

The collection in the sixty-fifth year included 71,000 catalogued items: books, DVDs, audiobooks, and other resources. The next year, 2011, saw the collection rearranged, new carpeting replacing the original from 1995, and the addition of downloadable
e-books and audiobooks as the library became one of the initial members of the South Dakota Titles to Go consortium.

Amber grew up in DeSmet and Lake Preston, South Dakota. As a young child in DeSmet she enjoyed the public library’s books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, for whom DeSmet had been home and the setting of some of her classic stories. Amber earned a journalism degree from South Dakota State University and an English degree from the University of South Dakota; while at USD in Vermillion she began working in that community’s public library. Later she worked for a year at the state library in Pierre. “At Pierre,” she recalled, “I got to know library people at the state level and gained an understanding of how libraries work together in our state.” In 2006 Amber and her family moved to Spearfish, where she worked at Black Hills State University’s E.Y. Berry Library and, briefly, as a reference librarian at Grace Balloch Memorial. Simultaneously she earned her Masters in Library and Information Science from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and was ready to step into the director’s position when Sharon Henry retired in 2008.

Amber inherited a building that reflected Spearfish’s collective personality well: deeply dedicated to education, at ease with ever-evolving technology, kid friendly, and solidly connected to the Black Hills’ natural splendor. That connection is seen in much of the library’s art, and what other library in the world is home to a mounted mountain lion? In 1998 a 120 pound male lion was killed by a car just east of Spearfish and donated to the library after a trip to a taxidermist. He quickly became highly popular among Spearfish children, and was named Look-Out in a contest. Also displayed throughout the library is a collection of 386 porcelain birds donated by the late Father Eugene Szalay. Born in Poland, Szalay was Spearfish’s Catholic priest in the early 1970s, and he used the library regularly to pursue his interest in Black Hills history.

Other items on permanent display include Little Red Riding Hood paintings by Liz Richards, a nationally accomplished illustrator living in Spearfish, as well as dolls from around the world, and vintage Spearfish baseball uniforms above the Ruddell collection. For the enjoyment of children especially, Ben and Carol Henry donated “Little House on the Prairie” wood carvings (characters by Harvey Hultquist, house and stand by Don Mundt).
Less conspicuous and scattered throughout the collection are many of Grace Balloch's own books – the seeds of this library sown in 1944. Her books are identifiable by her personal bookplate with an illustration of a child. He stands looking at a bookshelf above his head, as if waiting for someone's help in selecting something to read.
The Friends of Grace Balloch Memorial Library would like to thank Paul Higbee for his time and talent as well as his dedication to this history project.

The Friends of the Library and Paul Higbee would also like to acknowledge the many volunteers who contributed their memories and stories to this history and who maintained the library’s scrapbooks over the years, without which this booklet would not have been possible.

Author
Paul Higbee