

History of Johnson County Library and the Friends of Johnson County Library

Johnson County Library was founded in the early 1950s. It began with the PTA Library Committee at Prairie School. From this, a group of volunteers emerged who promoted the need for a county public library. The group, known as the Citizens Library Committee, recruited additional volunteers who carried petitions throughout the County. They were successful in getting a library question on the ballot in the fall of 1952 that was approved by voters four to one.

Since funding was not immediately available to establish and operate a library, the volunteers continued with their mission. They collected books, asked for lumber donations, built shelves, made curtains and painted walls.

On June 2, 1953, they opened the first volunteer library in the Dunbar School in Shawnee. The group sought out other locations for libraries including area stores and homes. A second library opened in the basement of a committee member's home in Merriam, and a third in the basement beneath Jay's Men's and Boy's Wear in the Prairie Village Shopping Center.

Several small, self-service libraries were set up in Gardner, Ochletree, Spring Hill, Edgerton and Stanley. Each had about 200 books which rotated every 60 days. By 1954 eleven volunteer branches were operating. People came to borrow books, donate materials and volunteer to help the Library.

The Library received its first funding from the Board of County Commissioners in 1955, a budget of \$32,000, and a first director, County Librarian Shirley Brother. Almost immediately, Miss Brother took charge of the volunteer libraries in storefronts and homes all over the county. One by one in late 1955 and early 1956, these volunteer libraries were taken over from the Committee volunteers by the new, paid library staff, the "real" library staff.

That same year the Citizens Library Committee then reorganized as the Friends of the Johnson County Library with more than 150 charter members. Gathering at Mrs. James May's home on March 26, 1956, 13 Committee members heard Miss Brother's report of this progress and also of plans for a possible headquarters building at the corner of Highway 50 and Antioch Road. In 1956 the Antioch Branch opened as "headquarters" on its present site and bookmobile service began to outlying communities. Antioch Library subsequently served as Headquarters for nearly 40 years until the move to the new Central Resource Library in August 1995. It reopened in April 1996 as a branch library.

Now that they did not need to campaign or run the volunteer libraries, the County Librarian told them, the founders could convert themselves to a library support group, perhaps renaming the Committee the "Friends of the Library." Further, she said, *"since this is the first county library in Kansas it will be used as an example, a high level of library service will be demanded, and an interested citizens group is necessary."*

Sally May agreed to chair a committee that subsequently recommended forming a Friends association, *"to be sponsored by the Johnson County Library Committee and augmented by various groups and interested persons throughout the county."* An organizational meeting was

scheduled for October 22, and launch was in Book Week beginning November 26, 1956, with Sally May as the first Friends President.

The founders had found a permanent, ongoing role in the life of the Johnson County Library. The zeal exhibited in founding the library characterized the Friends members' work during ensuing decades. In the late 1950s they organized and hosted special events for the Library. During the 1960s and 1970s the Friends advocated for a bond issue to build the Corinth Library. The 1980s and 1990s saw a major change in the Friends work as they added book sales to their support of the Library. They also campaigned for the Central Resource Library bond referendum of 1992 for \$12.8 million.

Today, the Friends of Johnson County Library has an annual budget of more than \$350,000, four staff positions, and a membership of more than 700. In 1996, the Friends opened a used bookstore in the Antioch Library. This venture was so successful that another used bookstore was opened in the Blue Valley library in 2003. A third store was opened at Central Resource Library in 2016. In the summer of 1988 the Friends launched its first annual book sale and in November 2010 added another large annual community used book sale which was held at Metcalf South Shopping Center. With the evolution of the Internet, the Friends began selling used books through four internet outlets, including Amazon. Materials for the Friends sales operation come from two sources – materials weeded from the Library's collection and donations from the greater community. Funds received through the Friends sales operations and membership dues are used for Friends expenses and the remainder is presented to the Library to support programming, collections, and staff development.

Each year, the Friends presents the Award for Distinguished Service (renamed the Shankel Award for Distinguished Service in honor of long-time Friends volunteers Opal and J.D. Shankel) to a Library volunteer who has shown exceptional dedication to the Library.

The Friends wields its political clout as "*an interested citizens group*," just as Miss Brother predicted would be so important. At the annual library budget hearing, the County Commissioners face the Friends representatives sitting on the front row with their identifying buttons. Friends members also participate in the Kansas Library Association (KLA) Legislative Day each year to communicate with legislators about library issues.

The Friends is also an award winning organization. In 2000 and 2010, the Friends won the **United for Libraries: ALTAFF** - Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations Library Friends Group of the Year Award and in 2000 and 2009 won the FOKL (Friends of Kansas Libraries) Library Friends Group of the Year Award. **United for Libraries: ALTAFF** also awarded the Friends a "Best Friends" award for their promotional ideas and included Friends best practices in a recent book. The Friends have also been awarded the ALA (American Library Association) Best of Show for their popular National Library Week Bookmark contest.