

The Library

No other project has ever received the same whole-hearted support as has the Fort Myers Beach Free Public Library.

In the spring of 1955, when the Woman's Club was considering a choice of projects for the coming year, Mrs. J. C. Healy presented a letter to the club outlining the feasibility of a library for the Beach. The suggestion was adopted and a committee comprised of Mrs. Healy, Mrs. Roland Hyatt, Jr., Mrs. John Taylor, Mrs. William Guess and Mrs. Harry Quig was formed to explore the situation and report back to the club. Mrs. Healy was appointed chairman of ways and means, and later became the first president of the board. Many hours of travel and research were put in by library boosters before it was deemed feasible to go ahead.

By August 1955, the name "The Beach Public Library" had been adopted, the former McGee Real Estate office selected as the Library's first home, and the library committee was made the first board of directors. Each organization on the Beach was invited to name one of its members to serve on the board and Mrs. Harry Quig, who had a background of library experience, was appointed librarian. She served until January of the following year at which time Mrs. James Miller took her place. From the beginning, the library was set up according to state library requirements as well as those of the American Library Association.

On September 25, the Library held open house and began circulating books. In November, request was made for Incorporation and in December incorporation papers were received. In June 1956 the original membership charge was dropped and the Fort Myers Beach Public Library became the first free public library in Lee County.

For the next few years life for the friends of the library was a swirl of benefits: bake sales, card parties, Bulletin subscription bonuses, luncheons, lectures and book reviews, all so imbued with enthusiasm that the public considered it a privilege to attend and leave their money.

What a tremendous job it was, however, for those who did the work -- but they, too, loved it.

In the summer of 1958 the idea of holding a benefit auction was born and the labor pains accompanying it were terrific, but on March 21, 1959, the elephants -- big ones, little ones, white ones and ancient ones, were trotted out from where they had been gathering all winter in the old Beach Theater, now San Carlos Marina storage building, and with Alfred Nutgrass to cry the sale, Aida Bee's library auction went over with a literal bang. A whole chapter could be written about this auction and the ones which have followed each year, and about the bone-tired happy people who make it successful, even the school children who tugged and carried heavy objects and ran errands all day long knowing that the Library was geared especially toward helping them. When the nickels, dimes and dollars were counted, they totaled \$1357.24.

A few weeks later, four lots were purchased on Bay Street and the board was off again! Plans were being made for a new library building.

For the next two years newspaper headings read, "Rotary Club gives toward new Library," "Building Fund Benefits from Lions Barbecue," "B.I.A. Donates \$100 to Building Fund," "Millikin Shell Collection given to Library," "Lions Club Pledges Money for Air conditioning," and "School Children Contribute to Library Fund." There were many others which reflected the whole-hearted support of every facet of the Beach. Then on May 31 the headline read, "Ground Is Broken for the New Beach Library Designed by Charles Morton." Individuals contributed many, many hours of hard manual labor and business firms, both here and from Fort Myers, gave materials at cost or entirely without charge. It was truly a community effort. On July 28, 1961, the dream had come true -- and the Library held its informal opening.

Under the guidance of Mrs. James Miller, Librarian, and her efficient board, the library showed a healthy growth plant-wise and public-wise, never wealthy but having adequate funds to operate. In the spring of 1965 a move got underway to combine all efforts in the area and form a county-wide library system. It had a familiar ring to those of us who remembered the fight in 1957 to "include us out" of the county-wide mosquito district. We had a library and, as one newspaper editorial pointed out, "We had a book," and the promises of state and county assistance were too nebulous for our library board to wax enthusiastic. In fact, local voices, raised clear and loud resulted in the formation of a Library Tax District similar to that of our Fire

and Mosquito Control districts, and provided a one-half mill levy. When the measure came up for voting, with a total of 979 freeholders in the district, 710 of them came out to vote, with 678 of them in favor of the separate tax district and only 32 opposed.

It was with regret that the Library Board accepted the resignation of Lou Miller in May 1965 after almost ten years as volunteer head librarian. Without doubt she has contributed more hours to the library than any one person, and the hours of her husband, Treasurer James Miller, would not total many less. Too many people have had big shares in creating this library to dare to mention any of them, even Aida (Mrs. Olen) Bee.

Upon the resignation of Mrs. Miller, and with the prospect of financial assistance from the new tax district, it was possible to hire a full-time librarian and in June Miss Emily Spencer, a professional librarian with thirty years experience, was chosen. At this time our library contains more than 10,500 well-screened books, a wide variety of periodicals, special reading rooms for children and is, perhaps, the finest young peoples' reference library in this area.

A photograph of Mrs. Olen Bee and Mrs. James Miller in the Library appears at this point in the book (p.43)