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White Oak Library District Celebrates 100 Years of Service in 2022

On January 26, 2022, the White Oak Library District, of which Romeoville is a member, will turn 100 years old. The Romeoville branch itself was not opened until 1971, but the district's unbroken thread of existence begins in late 1921 with the Lockport Woman's Club. They voted to create a library in December 1921 and, six weeks later, opened the doors to the Lockport Public Library on January 26, 1922. The Woman's Club ran the library from 1922 until early 1929, when they handed it off to Lockport Township to run. Now called the Lockport Township Public Library, the township put a referendum on the 1929 ballot asking the public for a source of revenue to run the facility. The referendum passed and the library survived.

The library was housed in a variety of facilities in downtown Lockport before coming to settle in the Boyer House, an old mansion on State Street. In 1965, the township built a new (and the current) Lockport library on the site of the Boyer House garden. In 1969, they created a second branch when they constructed a library in Crest Hill.

Meanwhile in Romeoville, the Jaycees, a community volunteering organization, sponsored a Community Attitude Survey to see what residents wanted in the growing town. The results of the 1967 poll saw 63% of respondents say they wanted a library and community center. A study was conducted and an exploratory committee formed. Village go ahead was given on November 6, 1968. Before a library could be constructed, a new library district had to be formed, which would encompass all those



Romeoville library prior to 2011 renovation

living in DuPage Township: Romeoville, Bolingbrook, and the unincorporated areas. A referendum was held on December 20, 1969 and passed. The new district was named the Fountaintdale Library District, based on a naming contest won by James Bingle. Fountaintdale was the name of one of the first settlements of note in DuPage Township.

Until a permanent facility could be built, the Romeoville library was housed in a room in Parkview School (now R.C. Hill). The temporary library opened on June 19, 1971. Ground was broken on the permanent library structure in September 1973 and completed in mid 1975. The property for both the Romeoville and Bolingbrook libraries was owned by Valley View School District and was intended to be used for expansion. As part of the deal for the land, the school district received free rent in the basement of the Romeoville library for 10 years. In fact, the basement was constructed specifically to serve as the school district's administration center.

In 1981, a question about the Lockport Township Public Library pulling away from Lockport Township was put on the ballot and was approved by the public. As a result, the Lockport and Crest Hill libraries formed their own library district and changed their name to the Des Plaines Valley Public Library District.

Romeoville residents who lived south of 135th Street were part of Lockport Township and were thus part of Des Plaines Valley. Residents living north of 135th Street were in DuPage Township and part of Fountaintdale. This presented a problem, as a majority of Romeoville residents were not directly serviced by the library in their own village. "The biggest problems I had in my 20 years working for the library," recalled Nancy Hackett, the former Romeoville Head Librarian, "were residents asking me 'Why can't I use my city library!?' A Romeoville resident living south of 135th Street would not be able to get a library card at the Romeoville library and was paying taxes to the Lockport and Crest Hill libraries, not the one in their own village. By 2006, two-thirds of Romeoville residents lived south of 135th Street. In 2008, Fountaintdale agreed to transfer its portion of Romeoville to Des Plaines Valley, uniting all of Romeoville into the same library district.

In 2010, Des Plaines Valley voters passed a \$23 million referendum to purchase and renovate the Romeoville library building, build a new Crest Hill library, and renovate and expanding the Lockport library. In 2011, as architectural plans were being finalized, a decision was made to rename the library district, which now included Romeoville. White Oak Library District was ultimately selected.

Renovations to the Romeoville building began in April 2011. At that time, the basement was not used by the library itself, but rather rented out to other entities. When Valley View School District moved out in December 1984, they left behind 23,000 square feet of space that was chopped up into little offices, which were occupied by many tenants over the years. Now, the library realized they could double the size of their space without enlarging the building itself. The basement was gutted and reconfigured and, for the first time, the space was dedicated to library uses. A ribbon cutting for the completed renovations was held in June of 2012.

Now entering its next century of library services, White Oak Library District is focused on two areas of growth. "We know the future for us is our children's department growing the next generation of library users," said Scott Pointon, the White Oak Library District Director. "We also are focused on our outreach department engaging seniors, making them love the library, and providing them with great library services."

Started by a dedicated group of volunteers in 1921 and moved forward by even more volunteers in 1968, the facilities you enjoy today were made possible by people who felt libraries were something that really mattered. Do your part to honor their legacy and pay a visit to the White Oak Library. Explore the services they offer and see for yourself why, 100 years later, people still flock to libraries.