

Morristown And Morris Township Library Celebrates Centennial

By Henry M. Holden

This coming year the Morristown and Morris Township Library turns 100. To celebrate this milestone, Library Director Chad Leinaweaver said "We'll be celebrating everything that is old.

"The antecedents of today's library started right after the Revolutionary War and continued with the Library and Lyceum throughout the 19th Century," Leinaweaver said. "Over the years there have been some changes, for example, we started out as a private library before becoming a public resource. The current "old wing" of the library dates to its grand opening in October of 1917."

In the early morning hours of Feb. 22, 1914, the Morristown Library and Lyceum, on the east side of South Street, burned to the ground. By mid-morning, all that remained was the stone facade and part of the side walls. A blizzard the following day delayed any salvage and all the contents were lost, including 15th century manuscripts, rare books, and a complete run of the "Palladium of Liberty," Morristown's first newspaper.

If not for Grinnell Willis, who had moved from New York City and lived in Morristown since 1889, the present Morristown Library building might not exist. In 1916, Willis, a wealthy textile merchant, donated \$56,000 to underwrite the new library on the corner of South Street and Miller Road. This was a neighborhood of homes and

churches: St. Peter's Episcopal Church, directly across Miller Road from the new library property, had just opened. The neighborhood was both quiet and elegant, and a new library was to be a fitting addition that would enhance the community.

In 1929, Willis donated another \$20,000 to create the building's children's room, and to meet future needs.

Because of the devastating fire the new library had to be completely fireproof, with concrete floors and steel supports, and with stairs made from Vermont marble. The roof is constructed of concrete supported by steel beams, topped with slate. The building's sturdy construction helped it to withstand the force of the May 3, 2010, explosion that severely damaged the first floor and basement.

The cornerstone was laid in August 1916, with great fanfare and public celebration, and in December 1917, the library opened its doors to patrons. The collection had 8,000 volumes, a figure that jumped to more than 43,500 volumes in just more than 20 years.

Today, according to Leinaweaver, "We have over 250,000 books and a large digital collection."

To kick off the 100th anniversary of the 'Willis Wing,' the original 1917 building, the library hosted a 'Speak-easy' reception, featuring a disc-jockey spinning Victrola shellac records, a dance instructor offering lessons on 1917-era dances, and more.

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In November and December, the early history of cartooning will be presented, said Leinaweaver. "Cartoons really got their start in the early part of the 20th century and we're going to take that history up to around the 1960s, which included early Walt Disney cartoons such as Oswald the Lucky Rabbit which was an anthropomorphic rabbit that morphed into Mickey Mouse. Disney was doing lots of playful but artistic things in the 20s and 30s. His focus was to try and create art out of this new medium.

"We also covered MGM and Bugs Bunny after Disney and

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delved into Disney's work during World War II."

Much of 2017's celebration plans are in the planning stage according to Leinaweaver. "We'll have more on our 2017 plans to announce at the beginning of the year."

Looking ahead to the next 100 years Leinaweaver said, "I wish I had something that would enable me to look that far ahead. Ten years ago, if you asked me to look ahead I would have said we're going to shift our access to electronic media and use the facilities through our website. While some of that has happened, I've noticed recently that there is something of a

push-back to analog. Our book clubs and other activities are very popular. Some of that is a factor of people staring at screens and being by themselves for long periods of time. I think we are seeking out others because we are creatures of congregation. I think we'll see a mix of old technologies and new in the future. We'll have books because they are still useful, and can be blended with electronic media."

The library has created an Anniversary Calendar filled with beautiful vintage photographs of the library, and a trivia contest on the back of the calendar, on sale for \$20 on the library's website: <http://www.jfpl.org/index.cfm> All proceeds go to fund library programs and services.