# OSCEOLA LIBRARY SYSTEM

The Osceola Library System began operations in 1989 as an independent organization offering library services to all residents of Osceola County. Prior to that, library service had been provided by the Orange County Library System on a contractual basis.

From early in the twentieth century until 1969, library services in Osceola County were provided by two small libraries, both operated independently by women's organizations: Hart Memorial Public Library on North Stewart Avenue in Kissimmee and Veterans Memorial Library on Massachusetts Avenue in St. Cloud.

Hart Memorial Public Library was located on land donated in 1910 by Carrie S. Hart, widow of a former Governor of Florida, Ossian B. Hart. In 1914 a group of ladies in Kissimmee donated $52 each and collected additional funds from citizens to build the Hart Memorial Public Library. A charter was issued to the Hart Memorial Chapter of the American Women's League and Annie Palmer Fell, widow of Nelson Fell, founder of Narcoossee and Fellsmere, donated books and furnishings from her personal library to help begin the public library.

In 1911 the Ladies Improvement Club established a reading room in a building in Oak Grove Park. In 1916 the Club raised $782 for lots on Massachusetts Avenue in St. Cloud to build a library. They paid $709 for the lots and the remaining $73 went into a building fund. Meanwhile, the wife of Colonel McElroy, president of the land company, donated a supply of books for the reading room.



The bank where the Club had deposited the building fund failed in 1918, in the aftermath of World War I. Undaunted, the members of the Ladies Improvement Club raised the funds again and the Veterans Memorial Library was dedicated that same year by Florida Governor Catts. Veterans Memorial Library was named in honor of the generous donations of Grand Army of the Republic posts across the nation. The Grand Army of the Republic was a fraternal organization of Union Army Civil War veterans.

These two small, independent libraries served their communities well. However, by 1967, the area was growing and residents recognized a need for a larger, community-sponsored library. In 1967 the Board of County Commissioners of Osceola County appointed a committee to study the feasibility of a regional library system in conjunction with Orange County.

Members of the feasibility committee included William Wallis, William Prather, Robert Fisk, Ms. William Sippel, Mrs. Murray Overstreet, Jr., Mrs. Paul Kirkpatrick, and Mrs. J.J. Griffin, Jr. Commissioner Luzadder was the liaison commissioner for the committee.

The first Library Advisory Board was appointed by the Board of County Commissioners of Osceola County in 1968. Members were William T. Wallis, Robert A. Fisk, William H. Prather, Mrs. Paul E. Kirkpatrick, Mrs. Murray W. Overstreet, Jr., Mrs. W.B. Makinson, and Mrs. J.J. Griffin, Jr.

Meanwhile, the Public Library of Kissimmee moved from the original Hart Memorial location to a new 4,000 square foot space at the corner of Broadway and Dakin in 1968; and, in the early 1970s, the Veterans Memorial Library moved from its Massachusetts Avenue location to the old downtown SunBank building

at 10th Street and New York Avenue in St. Cloud.

Developments lead to an Independent Library when County Ordinance 79-2, was approved on March 26, 1979, creating a Library District to provide comprehensive library services to all Osceola County residents. The District was given authority to levy up to .5 millage with the approval of the Board of County Commissioners.

Between 1969 and 1989, the Orange County Library System provided library services to Osceola residents on a contractual basis that included staffing and purchasing. At the end of the agreement, Osceola taxpayers were paying the Orange County Library System nearly $500,000 per year for services.

The Poinciana Branch Library, opened in 1988, was housed in a modular building–the first of its kind in the state–with movable circular bookshelves. Located in Doverplum Shopping Center at Cypress Parkway, the 1,800 square foot building cost $300,000 and housed approximately 14,000 books.

A milestone was achieved in 1989 when Osceola's first library director, Hester L. O'Leary, was hired.

In February 1989 the County Commissioners voted to sever the contract with Orange County Library System when it expired on March 31, 1989. On April 1, 1989, the Osceola Library System began operations as an independent organization offering library services to all residents of Osceola County.

The new library system grew steadily and a new 12,000 square foot Buenaventura Lakes Branch Library was opened to the public in 1990. It was the first stand-alone building for the new county-controlled library system. In 1991 a group of dedicated volunteers opened the Kenansville Branch Library, which shared space with the old Kenansville School.

A new headquarters location was opened in January 1994 with a new 43,000 square foot building on the site that formerly housed the Mickler & Sons Orange Crate Company. The fifteen acre parcel is owned by the City of

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*Above: Veterans Memorial Library, St. Cloud Branch. Circa 2004.*

*Below: Buenaventura Lakes Branch Library. Circa 2006.*

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*Above: Hart Memorial Public Library. Circa 1914.*

*Below: Hart Memorial Central Library. Circa 2006.*



Kissimmee, with two acres committed to the library system.

The rapid growth continued during the 1990s and the Veterans Memorial Library–St. Cloud branch opened in 1995 in a 15,000 square foot space in the old SunBank building on Indiana Avenue and 13th Street in St. Cloud. The 11,860 square foot Poinciana Branch Library opened in 1998 at the corner of Doverplum Avenue and San Remo Road. The $1 million branch–with 40,000 books, Internet computers and plenty of parking–was a substantial improvement over the old modular building.

In 2000, an Interlocal Agreement was signed by the School Board of Osceola County and the Osceola County Board of County Commissioners to provide public library service in fast-growing communities. That same year, Narcoossee Library Annex opened in the Narcoossee Community School Media Center.

The West Osceola Branch Library opened in 2006 in a 2,000 square foot storefront on busy Highway 192 near Celebration. Previously, the Celebration area's needs had been served from a small space shared with the Celebration School.

Three back-to-back hurricanes in August and September of 2004 pummeled Osceola County, causing more than a million dollars worth of structural damage to the Hart Memorial Central Library. The Kenansville Branch Library was a total loss and other locations received minor damage. The Hart Memorial Central Library was closed five months for repairs and renovations. During this period, the Osceola Library System served Kenansville area customers two days a week from the Kenansville Community Center. During reconstruction of the Hart Memorial Central Library, customers could call ahead, and then pick up resources through the back door during limited hours.

The Kenansville Branch Library was reestablished in 2007 with a new modular unit housing more than 6,400 resources, including kid's books, bestsellers, DVDs, and large-print books. Customers may also surf the web on two Internet computers or bring their own WiFi-ready laptops and connect to the Library's free WiFi.

The Osceola Library System was honored in 2007 when it was named Florida Library of the

Year–Innovation in Customer Service. The award is presented by the Florida Library Association to library systems that demonstrate creativity or innovation in the delivery of library services to the community. "It's just a real feather in the cap for people who work in the library," commented library director Edward A. Kilroy. "Their hard work has paid off with this wonderful award."

In 2008 the library system received the Florida Library Association award for Public Library Website of the Year for providing excellent customer service via the World Wide Web.

The eighty-seven full-time employees of the Osceola Library System serve the residents of Osceola County with seven locations within a service area of more than 1,506 square miles. The number of residents with Library cards has increased from 3,071 in 1969 to 94,000 in 2007.

From its small beginnings, the Osceola Library System has grown to become a place of connections between people, information, the community, and personal discovery.

For additional information on the Osceola Library System or to locate a branch near you, visit www.osceolalibrary.org.

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*Above: Computers for kids. Circa 2007.*

*Below: Veterans Memorial Library, St. Cloud Branch. Circa 2006.*