



Friends of Rudy Gelnett Memorial Library

www.friendsgelnetlibrary.org

History of the Selinsgrove Community Library

The Selinsgrove Community Library is 75 years old in 2012. Begun 1937 as the “reading lounge” of the Selinsgrove Community Center, it has always relied on community spirit and support for its life and livelihood. The 2012 commemorative crock presented by the Friends of the Selinsgrove Library features the newly renovated and enlarged Library, to be named in honor of benefactor and frequent library patron, Francis R. “Rudy” Gelnett. The crock’s illustration was designed by local artist and community advocate, Rodney Ries.

The Library had its origins in the Selinsgrove Community Center. Planning for the Center began in 1936 under the auspices of the New Deal's National Youth Administration program. In 1937 these plans reached fruition when the Community Center was opened in a house located at 106 North Market Street which was held by the First National Bank and loaned gratis in lieu of local taxes. The Community Center was funded by the local Community Chest, a forerunner of the United Way. On October 2, 1939 it became incorporated.

The Community Center was a pioneer facility, recognized by national leaders in recreation and cited in leading magazines. It had programs for the young and for adults, some in instruction, such as a popular course in tap dancing, some in recreation, such as ping pong tournaments and some as programs aimed at assuring public health, such as prenatal clinics held by public health nurses. Among these programs was the reading lounge overseen by Mrs. Mary Nesbitt, Center Director. Here was the town’s first library. It had over 300 books in a lending library, several magazines but virtually no non-fiction or reference books. For these, patrons were referred to the recently opened library at Susquehanna University.

The Community Center continued to harbor the reading lounge until 1942, when federal assistance ceased and the First National Bank decided to sell the house. The Community Center, including its reading lounge, then moved to the first floor of the Masonic Lodge at 112 South Market Street (now Sharon Lutheran Churches north side parking lot). The Masons donated this space, asking only that heat be paid for by the Center’s sponsors. Here the library continued for 25 years, essentially as a large reading lounge in the Community Center. Its director for most of these years was Mrs. Henry Mowles.

By the 1960s the limits of the library were reached. It had over 3000 volumes in its collection but the number of hours these were available to the public diminished until they were ten a week, two hours a day for five days. In 1967 the future of the Selinsgrove Community Center was threatened. The Masonic Lodge wanted to use its first floor for its recently displaced auxiliary groups. The board of the Community Center was informed that it would have to vacate the premises by September of 1967. The Town Council was charged to find new space and cast its eye on the recently abandoned Pine Street School which it had purchased from the School District for \$1.00 in 1965. To build a Community Center and Borough offices in that space would cost over \$200,000 according to Town Manager Jim App. This would increase the tax burden of local residents, requiring a referendum on the matter. It was passed by a slim margin and the project moved forward. The building was built on the foundation of the Pine Street School and was planned to provide space for community activities, Borough offices and a Library. Temporarily, the Library moved to the "stage room" in the Masonic Lodge, a dark and small space entered from a dimly-lit walk-way on the south side.

In the summer of 1970, the new building was occupied. It had rooms for community events and activities in the basement, Borough offices on the south side of the main floor and the Selinsgrove Library on the north side. The latter was one large room with a children's corner, seating for thirty adults and a balcony full of stacks holding over 10,000 books. A professional librarian, Ms. Mary Klaue, was hired as director, library hours were extended and new services initiated. A joint-governing board oversaw both the Community Center and the library and a Friends of the Selinsgrove Library group was initiated in 1971, a fund-raising, auxiliary organization.

For the next forty years change was incremental. Financial limitations were significant, especially since the roles libraries played were constantly changing and the public was relatively uninterested in funding them. Gradually, the Community Center was phased out; its rooms were taken by the Selinsgrove Police Department, community space and library offices. The Friends group faded away and in 1991 its activities were assumed by the Library's board.

In these years, two changes were particularly important for the library. First, in 1976, the Snyder County Commissioners created the Snyder County Library system which enlarged the reach of the Selinsgrove Library, the hub of the system. Books and other material radiated from this Library to a facility in McClure, small libraries in Middleburg and Beavertown and several deposit stops which were in Post Offices and living facilities for Seniors in the County. Second, the Snyder County Library system began to automate, using digital resources, computers and the internet. This began in 1988 with a grant from the federal government and was completed in January of 1991. Computers now were crucial for reference work and to library patrons with personal projects and goals requiring these services. The library's catalogs now left cards and entered the ethereal space of the computer. The character of library services changed. Fewer books entered circulation and the Library, itself, became a type-of information-based community center. Special programs were targeted for specific audiences, such as the pre-school story groups for children.

Although worn, the Library was a very busy place. Its space became completely saturated. The collection of books and other material could not be easily increased; new programs could not be easily scheduled; residents seeking to use computers could not be easily satisfied. Enlarged and renovated space was needed. In the first decade of this Century, discussions about additional space intensified among members of the Snyder County Library Board, Borough officials and town boosters from Selinsgrove Projects, Inc. These discussions were focused on matters of location and funding. In 2003 the Friends of the Selinsgrove Community library was reorganized, sponsoring fund-raisers designed to support existing Library services and give encouragement to those desiring better and larger space for the Selinsgrove Library. The Library Board committed to remaining in the Borough, a decision bulwarked when local "angels" purchased abandoned and deteriorating properties fronting

the Community building. This led to the creation of a Selinsgrove Commons, a beautiful space serving as a “front door” for the renovated and expanded library.

In May of 2011, ground-breaking (actually wall-smashing by sledgehammer) for the renovation and expansion of the Selinsgrove Library occurred. Designed by EI Associates of Harrisburg and built by Palmer Construction, the general contractor, the renovated and expanded Library was on the north side of the structure and Borough offices remained on the south side with community rooms beneath. While the footprint of the borough’s space remained basically the same, the library’s space doubled, going from one to three floors in renovated and expanded space. It opened in November of 2012, adding to the overall sense of revitalization occurring in Selinsgrove in the first decades of the 21st Century.

Information for this history was obtained from the Selinsgrove Times and files provided by the Selinsgrove Community Library. Dr. Donald D. Housley, Professor Emeritus, Susquehanna University