

SPREADING THE WORD

Government policy in Alberta is to cut funding and promote user fees. For libraries, this trend has diminished people's access to books and information. Two "radical" projects—one community-driven and one personal—are opening new doors to readers.

Banff's Very Public Library

by Shelley Mardiros

From the outside, the little brown building at the corner of Bear and Buffalo streets has a certain rustic charm, occasionally enhanced by the presence of an elk grazing on the lawn. But to find out what's really special about the Banff Public Library, a newcomer to Banff would have to enter the doors, approach the circulation desk, and ask for a library membership. With proof of Banff residency, the newcomer would get a library card—for free.

On January 1st, 2000, Banff Public Library became the first library in Alberta to remove the membership fee for local residents—thus reversing a trend toward a curious form of "privatizing" libraries that has swept Alberta in recent years. In Banff, the effect of eliminating the fee was immediate and dramatic. In January, three times as many new members joined the library as had joined the previous January.

The Banff library board initiated the no-fee policy, dubbed "Reaching Readers 2000" to ensure that everyone in the community who wanted to borrow books could have a library card of her own. The \$10 annual fee that had deterred some low-income residents, or prompted, say, a whole household of young, seasonal workers to share one card, would no longer be a factor. News of the Banff initiative and of its dramatic results quickly rippled through the Alberta library community.

Banff Public Library became the focus of a long-ignored issue in Alberta: how public is the public library?

In most of the world, public libraries are genuinely public. They are supported by some combination of the tax base of the municipality and other levels of government; local residents and ratepayers have free access to the library's services, including borrowing privileges at lending libraries.

In Alberta, too, libraries are largely funded through tax dollars, with more than 85 per cent of library board revenue coming from local and provincial governments. But Albertans aren't automatically entitled to borrow materials from the libraries that their tax dollars fund. Libraries in Alberta charge local ratepayers an annual fee of up to \$20 for the privilege of a library card, a form of double taxation that disproportionately burdens lower-income families—and which may exclude them altogether.

Defenders of a free public library argue it is not only unfair to charge individuals for access to a library funded by taxes, but unwise, if we want to encourage all members of society to be informed and literate. The municipal fire department doesn't require individuals to pay an annual registration fee, for the very good reason that towns and cities want the fire department to be available to every household in the community. Are public libraries not just as vital?

The notion of a free public library is not particularly new or radical. In Canada, eight provinces and all three territories support the concept of libraries free to local residents.

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of 1994 describes the public library as a cornerstone of democracy. “The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making, and cultural development.” Further, it asserts, “The public library shall in principle be free of charge.”

The notion of a free public library is not particularly new or radical. In Canada, eight provinces and all three territories support the concept of libraries free to local residents. Two provinces—B.C. and Saskatchewan—specifically and unambiguously mandate that local residents must be allowed to borrow materials free of charge. Indeed, the original Alberta Public Libraries Act of 1907 clearly states, “All libraries and reading rooms established under this Act shall be open to the public free of all charges.” Even the current Alberta Libraries Act appears to defend the public right to borrow free of charge.



Usership rose dramatically when library user fees were eliminated.

So how is it that, in the year 2000, every major library in Alberta, with the exceptions of Banff and the Lloydminster public libraries (the latter governed by the Saskatchewan Public Libraries Act, 1996), charge an annual fee to borrowers?

Pat MacNamee, library consultant at Alberta Community Development, chooses her words carefully when describing the government position on fees. “Libraries are not permitted to charge a membership fee. All members of the public are library members, with free access to the five or six basic services that the Act mandates. But library boards are permitted, at their option, to charge for the issuance of a library card, for use in tracking borrowed materials.”

Some libraries have been exercising that option for

decades, interpreting it as licence to charge an annual fee. Banff Public Library, for example, opened its doors on December 14, 1949 and charged adults \$1 and students 50 cents for an annual membership. When the library became an official public library under the Libraries Act in 1974, it continued to charge annual membership fees, labelled as such on its financial statement. By 1999, the annual fee for an adult had increased to \$10.

Whether or not one calls it a membership fee, the annual charge for the privilege of borrowing books has now spread all across Alberta. Calgary Public Library began charging a “registration fee” in 1989, followed by Red Deer in 1991, Medicine Hat in 1992. Edmonton was the last major library board to resist levying a user fee on cardholders, but it too introduced an annual registration fee in 1994, following the Klein government’s cuts to municipal budgets and to provincial library funding. Elsa Rice, then chair of the Edmonton Public Library Board recalls that “we regarded the move as inevitable: there was no avoiding it in the economic/political climate of that time.”

Thus, the principle of universal entitlement to public library services gradually has been extinguished. In the 1990s, the flip side of the Alberta Advantage—low tax rates, which offer a disproportionate benefit to high income earners—was the Alberta Disadvantage—double taxation through user fees for public services, costs that disproportionately burden lower-income families.

In 1999, looking toward millennium plans and the library’s 50th anniversary celebrations, the Banff library board became aware that Alberta had become something of an anomaly in the world library community. On researching the issue of membership fees, they could find only one other place in North America where residents paid a fee to belong to their local library. In Quebec, about half the public libraries charge a membership fee, and half do not. There, the libraries that instituted a fee experienced significant drops in membership rates.

The Banff board decided to test the effect of the fee in the Banff community. In a bold, unfunded move, the board voted to “eliminate membership fees for the millennium.” In 1999, membership fees made up 6.9 per cent of the library’s operating revenue. The board looked to various sources to make up the shortfall, including Banff town council and the federal Millennium Project fund, but was prepared to fall back on its donation fund or capital reserves if necessary. The town council unanimously endorsed the initiative in principle in December 1999, but didn’t fund the revenue shortfall.

The immediate effect of the Banff initiative—a jump in new members—was good news to the Banff board, and very interesting news to the rest of the province. At the annual Alberta library conference in April, front-line library staff from around the province remarked to the Banff representatives that patrons in their libraries were asking why their library couldn't eliminate membership fees.

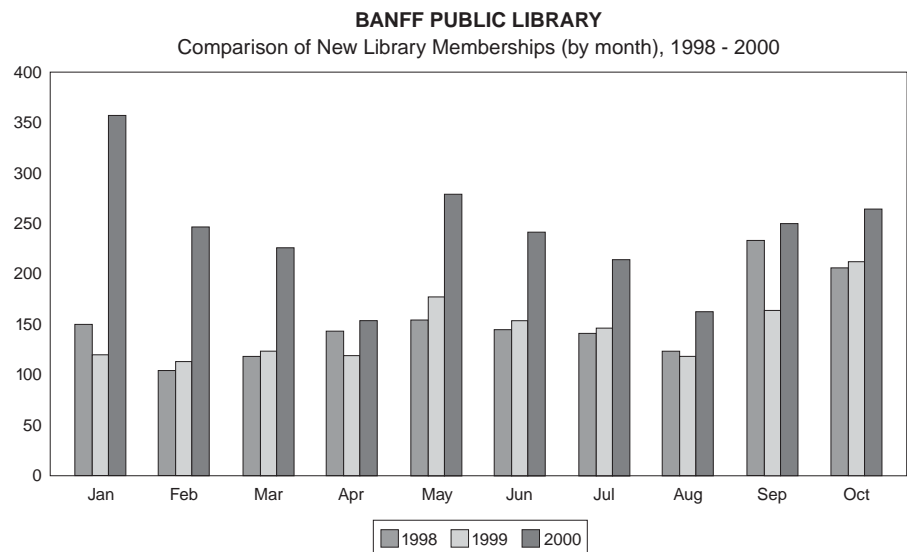
In Edmonton, the Banff results spurred the library board to revisit the issue of registration fees. Past chair Don Carmichael put together an analysis of the effects of the registration fee based on pre- and post-fee library statistics. He found that the board had originally projected that the registration fee would generate an annual revenue of \$1.4 million. In reality, the revenue was less than half that in the first year, and had fallen to \$665,000 by 1999. Of even more concern to Carmichael was the question of public access. The library board had anticipated a temporary drop in borrowers, which was indeed borne out. The number of “transacting borrowers” (that is, patrons who borrowed materials) dropped by 13 per cent in the first year. Far from recovering in subsequent years, however, the number of borrowers dropped 22 per cent below pre-fee figures in the second year, and has remained between 20 and 22 per cent lower through 1999.

In April, the Edmonton library board committed itself to developing strategies to eliminate the registration fee by seeking offset funding, but for Carmichael this is not a matter for municipalities alone. “I find these results extremely worrisome. It's imperative that we look more carefully at these developments on a province-wide basis.”

As uncomfortable as the admission is for library trustees trying to deal with tight budgets, all of the library staff to whom I have spoken recognize that fees act as a deterrent. “Our board just doubled the fee to \$20 per adult,” said one librarian in a northern Alberta community, “and there are families I just don't see anymore; I know they can't afford it.” In July, the tiny community of Longview, in southern Alberta, followed Banff's lead and eliminated membership fees. Sylvia Binkley, the board chair, was delighted and surprised by the results. “We knew about Banff's experience, so we thought we'd try it. Almost immediately, membership shot up from 55 to 75! We're definitely going to try to continue to offer free memberships.”

Strains on library and municipal budgets in 2000 do not extend to the province. For a mere 0.1 per cent of its anticipated \$5.5-billion surplus for the year, Alberta could not only replace the revenue libraries currently raise through user fees, but could redress the underfunding that libraries have endured since 1994 because of provincial funding cut-backs and freezes.

Back in Banff, the library board is a little overwhelmed by the success of the program and the attention it has brought to the library. In August, the board made a presentation to the town council, sharing letters and e-mails of



Since elimination of the membership fee on January 1, 2000, registration of new members has been significantly higher each month than in the same month of previous years. (Renewal memberships, not shown here, have not changed significantly.)

congratulation received from the library community across the country, articles in a variety of publications, notes from enthusiastic patrons, and a graph showing the steady climb of library membership, month by month—up 27 per cent by the end of July.

“I'm proud of what the library is doing,” says Banff mayor Dennis Shuler. “Given council's unanimous support of the initiative in principle, and considering this year's dramatic increase in library membership, I hope that council will approve the funds to replace the lost revenue from membership fees.”

But libraries and the values they support—literacy, lifelong learning, acquisition of information—are not solely the responsibility of municipalities. It will require a clarification of legislation and a corresponding increase in provincial funding to ensure that every Albertan has what Banffites now have—free access to the truly public library that their tax dollars support. 🐾

Shelley Mardiros is a freelance writer and treasurer of the Banff Public Library Board. The library website is www.banfflibrary.ab.ca.

Book Angel

Taking the spirit of reading to the back roads in a blue Chevy Astro

by Dan Rubinstein

"I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library."

— ARGENTINE WRITER JORGE LUIS BORGES

It's a quarter past eight on a pastoral late June morning in central Alberta. Seventy-one-year-old Kathleen Evans is barreling down the crunchy range roads of Leduc County in her decade-old light blue Chevy Astro, a cloud of dust and shower of pebbles her untidy wake. The canola fields are blooming bright yellow, tufts of poplar fluff float through the air like Hollywood snow and the sun has already chased away the dawn's dew.

Evans eases off the gas to allow a magpie safe passage, brakes to avoid a gopher and points out the peril of an approaching milk truck—a constant hazard on these narrow strips of gravel, she notes sagely, before accelerating again. Evans clearly doesn't have time to pull over and soak up her idyllic surroundings. And last March's hip replacement surgery hasn't slowed her down, either.

Today, as she's done up to three days a week for 14 straight years, Evans is on a mission. Within a half hour's drive of the Wetaskiwin-area house the retired teacher shares with her husband, Dick, live hundreds of children. With schools shut down for the summer and parents run ragged tending to livestock or crops or working in nearby towns to supplement the farm income, time-consuming trips to the library become a low priority. The torrent of books on which these children thrive becomes a trickle.

Until Evans and her travelling library turn in to the driveway, that is.

"Some people ask me: if I won the lottery, what would I do?" says Evans, as we approach the home of the Rasmuson family, the first stop on this morning's carefully plotted route. "To read is to know," she intones. "I think there's a direct correlation between reading and achievement. Kids

should have a right to read. So if I won the lottery, I'd start a library in every little community in the county."

Lacking the riches necessary for such an exhaustive undertaking, Kathleen Evans has done the next best thing.

In the face of provincial government education cutbacks, financially impaired school administrators have generally deemed libraries more expendable than other in-house programs, according to Alvin Schrader, director of the University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Studies. At the same time, public libraries have seen more investment on computers and Internet access, often, indirectly, at the expense of book acquisitions and staffing. Moreover, while funding from municipalities and the province has remained steady since the early 1990s (and some rural municipalities put more emphasis on filling potholes than shelves) it hasn't been increased to match inflation. "Certainly," says Schrader, "I don't think there's nearly enough investment on books and access to materials for young people."

Evans, accordingly, has made it her goal to provide local children with enough literary stimulation to get through the summer. And though she doesn't want to draw attention to herself—"I don't know how you can separate me from the books, but I want you to do it," she says. "Just call me a fairy godmother or something"—it's impossible to capture the spirit of this unique endeavour without writing about the woman who single-handedly makes it happen.

The van drives within sight of the Rasmuson house and two-year-old Damien jumps in anticipation. As soon as Evans slides open the side door, he clambers into the book-laden vehicle; his mother, Lynn, remains on the driveway, a baby in her arms. With a contented grin, Damien sits cross-legged on the Astro's carpeted floor and begins pulling colourful storybooks off the shelf. "No, not

Evans still hasn't had the time to count the number of books in the van; the thousand or so here today are part of a much larger collection of 15,000 kept in a storage cottage at home.

that one," Lynn shakes her head as he displays a title, "we've had that one before."

The van's interior is immaculate: 15 wooden shelves line the van, each with a latched guardrail to ensure the books remain secure on the bumpy back roads. Before a local farmer offered to build the customized shelves for Evans, she carted around her treasures in milk crates. She still hasn't had time to count the number of books in the van; the thousand or so here today are part of a much larger collection of 15,000 kept in a storage cottage at home.

Evans started dreaming about her own library two decades ago while teaching and running her school's small library in the town of Gwynne. Each year, the principal sent her to Edmonton to purchase new stock. In 1982, while in the capital completing the task, Evans attended a conveniently scheduled Children's Literature Association meeting. Inspired by her conversations with a handful of authors, she proceeded to spend \$188 on books, exceeding the \$100 budget her principal had allotted. He was upset when she returned to Gwynne. While enduring his lecture, she thought, "I'm going to start my own library, so I don't have to listen to anybody."

After five years of reading review magazines and buying brand new books, Evans was ready for her inaugural run. In the summer of 1987, on her way home from grocery shopping, she began calling on seven families in her little brown Chevette Scooter. Talking to parents confirmed her theory: children sometimes read the same book over and over again because they didn't have access to anything else. Or, worse, they'd stop reading and spend more time watching television.

These days, several vehicles and thousands of books later, Evans's route has swelled to 66 families and more than 200 children. She makes her rounds on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, attaching a different handmade card-filing cozy to the van's rear doors each day. Although she admits the work tires her, she can't bear the thought of children without books. "I want to do this for four more years," she says. "When I'm 75, that's when I won't want to do it. I don't want to be seen as a little old lady."

From the Rasmuson house we drive to the Christenson residence. Evans honks the horn and two sleepy-eyed girls lope outside. While Melissa, 12, and Rachel, 9, flip through

the shelves, their mother, Nancy, and Evans exchange news. Nancy has a friend who wants to move to the area from southern Alberta; Evans advises against buying a nearby house that's for sale.

This is another role Evans plays. When she travels from home to home, she dispenses more than books: she delivers messages, she updates people on county developments. She spreads information the old-fashioned way, establishing a face-to-face connection that's often lost in today's technology-saturated world. She instills a sense of community that's a natural accompaniment to the printed word.



Kathleen Evans delivers books to 66 families and over 200 children.

"I think politicians don't want the populace to be a thinking populace," she says when we're back on the road, "because if people think, they'll find out what politicians are all about."

Two stops later, while her daughters select their weekly rations in the van, Donna Knull reflects on Evans's propensity for sharing news. "It used to be the mailman," she laughs. "Now it's Kathleen."

After a mid-morning coffee break on the Morgan farm, the scene is repeated a half-dozen times. Some of the older children come out by themselves, comfortable with Evans after years of her visits. One mother of four is cutting the grass on a riding mower, an infant in her arms; she's definitely too busy to make it to the library. Her girls quickly find books and scamper back to a tent on the lawn to read.

At 1 o'clock, we arrive at the day's last stop, the LaGrange farm. Lynn and Rod welcome Evans into their airy farmhouse for lunch. Their children, 16-year-old

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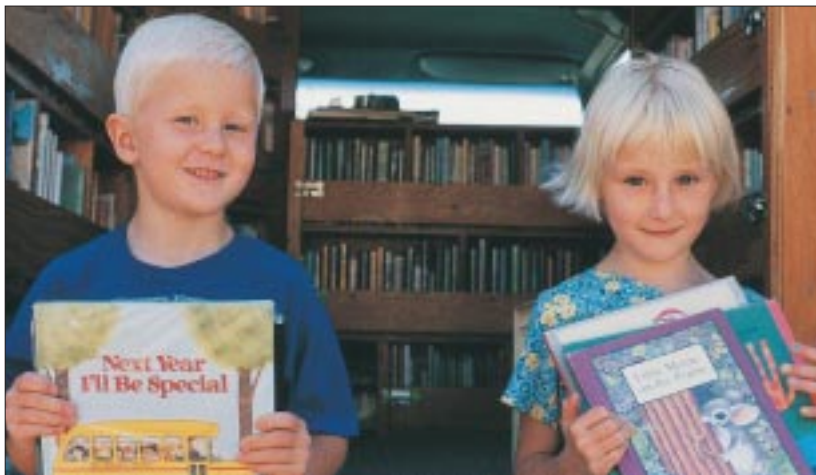
Asher and 14-year-old Delaney, have been borrowing books from her for 10 years. "This has been a godsend for us," Lynn says, as we sit around a stout wooden table in the

sun-splashed kitchen. "It just opens up their whole world," adds Rod, nodding at his kids.

"Reading takes us to a different place," agrees Delaney, peering up from his sandwich. "On our first day of summer holidays, when we finally could watch TV, I found myself trying to finish *Huckleberry Finn*."

After lunch, Delaney pulls on a cowboy hat and runs out to the van with his bare-foot sister. They pull books off the shelves, run their fingers over the spines and carefully study the covers.

Evans steps down from the porch a few minutes later. "The government does not know," she says, looking at the teens, "the riches of this land." 🐾



Dylan and Jordyn Mayer are among the 200 children served by Evans' travelling library

Dan Rubinstein is a freelance writer living in Edmonton.