

The Walpole Public Library

by Eleanor M. Harding

It was almost 160 years ago that a group of Walpole women began meeting every second Thursday as "The Ladies' Literary, Moral Society," taking turns reading aloud such books as would "afford useful information to the mind and improvement to the heart. During the five-hour long meetings, at which no unnecessary conversation was permitted, the women braided straw in order to earn money for new books. When, in a few years, a goodly number of books had been accumulated, they were made available to non-members who paid \$1.00 a year for the privilege.

In 1872, through the efforts of Miss Mary R. Bird, a Library Association was started in East Walpole, housed in Bird Hall. Four years later, at a town meeting, it was voted on petition of George A. Kendall, Francis W., Bird and others, "to establish and maintain a free public library." At the same meeting a board of six trustees was chosen, and \$485.00 was appropriated for support of the library. The seven hundred volumes owned by the East Walpole group were given to the library, which was opened to the public in July 1876, in Frank O. Pilsbury's drugstore. Later, in 1881, the library was moved "to commodious and beautiful rooms in the Town Hall.

Because in less than twenty years the library had out-grown the Town Hall, the Trustees wrote to Andrew Carnegie, the philanthropist, requesting his help in obtaining a library building. Mr. Carnegie answered that, if the town would furnish a suitable site, and would pledge not less than \$1500.00 a year for support, he would be glad to give \$15,000.00 for this purpose. Charles S. Bird provided the land at the corner of Common Street and Lewis Avenue, many citizens added money to the Carnegie grant, and the Public Library was erected for the sum of \$25,000.00. The dedication of the building took place on May 14, 1903.

For several years branch libraries, open one afternoon a week, were staffed in East Walpole at Bird and Sons, at South Walpole in the Fire House, and at North Walpole in a room in the old Fisher School. collections of books, changed frequently, were sent to all classrooms in the town, until the middle 1960's. Now every school has its own library.

In 1930 the Charles Sumner Bird Children's Room opened on the lower floor of the main library, financed from Mr. Bird's bequest of \$25,000.00. Money from this fund was also used to furnish and equip the East Walpole Branch Library in 1934, the former Church and Wednesday Club at the corner of Walcott Avenue and Union Street, having been purchased by the town. Twenty-three years later, and attractive Children, room was opened in the basement. There is no more opportunity for expansion at the East Branch which is now, in the '70's, greatly cramped for space.

In 1959, the School Committee permitted the North Walpole Branch to occupy most of the basement in the old Fisher School - not the most desirable quarters for a library but, so far, the only place available in that part of town.

As the town grew in size from 3572 people in 1903 to over 16,000 in the 1960's, the Main Library became more and more inadequate to serve the townspeople. A mezzanine adding 600 square feet of stack space was only a stopgap. Several surveys by the State Library Commissioners emphasized the imperative, and immediate, need for expansion, and in 1963 a committee was appointed by the town for this study. After two years of intensive and consideration of the space problem, the committee, under the chairmanship of William Petrie, requested and received of the town \$20,000.00 for final plans and specifications.

Judging from records of the past hundred years, the people of Walpole have always been great readers and users of the Public Library. The percentage of books borrowed per capita is, for towns of comparable size, one of the highest in the county.

And so, at the town meeting in 1967, the townspeople voted *unanimously* to appropriate the sum of \$402,120.00 to be reduced by a \$99,000.00 Federal Grant, for an addition to, and remodeling of, the Carnegie Building. Work was begun at once, and through the maximum efforts of the Head Librarian, Miss Mary E. Locke, and all members of the staff, inconvenience to the patrons of the library was held to a minimum.

The building, finished in 1969, is spacious and attractive. In addition to good lighting, carpeting to reduce noise, and bright-colored furniture, there is an adult reading room, a music room with turntables and earphones, and a meeting room for seventy people. The library needs of the community will be served adequately for many years to come.

