

“Our Libraries, Our Florida”

GFWC Coco Plum Woman's Club

Eight women living in the wilderness of Southern Florida gathered at the home of Eleanor Jordan in February 1912. Their husbands had moved here in hopes of bettering their lives. On the other hand, the women were missing the comforting social structure and friends they had known in their former communities. That rainy day these pioneer women had more on their minds than sewing as they sipped lemonade. They organized the Thimble Club of Larkins, located in the area that is South Miami today, but was called Larkins back then. Today the Thimble Club is known as GFWC Coco Plum Woman's Club of Coral Gables.

The membership increased so rapidly that a club house was needed. The simple, wooden clubhouse constructed by their husbands in 1913 contained a book shelf on which there was one book, *Pollyanna*, written by Eleanor Porter that same year. This book, donated by President Mary E. Dorn, was the beginning and nucleus of the expanding library, which served the local community for fifty-six years.

Pollyanna was the precursor to the growing library. Throughout the years, the library's shelves were filled by donations from members, community businesses, fund raising events and book showers. In the club's 1925 scrapbook, there was mention of a book shower at which the ladies came dressed in costumes depicting their favorite book and brought books. This event was reported as “a great success both as to the number of books and the amusement by some of the costumes.” The report concluded with “The greater number of the books are fiction, although the library contains large number of books of history, biography, some poetry and an encyclopedia.”

In 1913 our inspired pioneer members had little “to-dos, entertainments...with free will offerings,” raising \$100 to purchase five acres of land for \$100 as the site for the clubhouse. Then in 1926 our clever business women sold four acres for \$100,000, using the funds for construction of today's National Historic Landmark clubhouse. No funding from the government nor large private donations was required. The space gained was vital for the growing needs of increased membership, expansion of the library and community demands throughout the coming years.

The resulting library was no longer shelves of books, but a reading room lined with books and furnished with tables and chairs for comfortable reading and study. The significance of our members' efforts is that they were providing a free library for the community in the second and third decades of the 20th Century when there were no public libraries in this area..

Due to increasing usage, the club was fortunate to have a professional librarian for several years, paid for by the county. Additional staffing was provided by our Library Committee volunteer members. There is no accurate record as to the operating hours of the library except for a 1948 newspaper article, which stated that it was open three days a week and there were hopes for keeping it open one evening as well.

Children were the principal users of the library, going there for resource information as well as for borrowing books. Adults were welcomed borrowers as well. When the University of Miami was newly opened and had no library, ours was available for the university students and professors.

In the summer of 1948, a new type of library service was created. Instead of the school children coming to our library, impossible in the summer when schools were closed and there was no bus service, the librarian, Mrs. Marfak, proposed creating a traveling library. Our Library Committee, chaired by Mrs. Tyler Bliss, probably had doubts and questions about having a Book Wagon, but it was decided to go ahead with the project.

Starting at 9:30 on what was to become a Wednesday morning routine, the librarian and one of our club volunteers drove to three locations. What did they find? Eager “bookworms,” “waving and jumping up and down.” Many of these children had walked or bicycled for long distances just to reach the Book Wagon’s appointed meeting place. No one had anticipated such a welcoming reception and appreciation. No one had anticipated that the Book Wagon would be a trail blazer, the first traveling library in the entire state, according to one newspaper.

On September 23, 1964, *The Miami Herald* awarded a special citation to the Coco Plum Woman's Club for 51 years of service to the community. Of more significance to the members were the “Thank you for letting us use your library” letters that were received throughout the years from students in the area.

In 1964, our members gave over 1,500 hours of service in the library. The annual circulation was 32,350 books. Up until this time, library usage was free. However, due to increasing costs of books, a single member was asked to pay \$1 per year, while family membership was \$3 per year. There were 1,726 paid memberships in 1964.

With the opening of the Coral Gables Public Branch Library at Segovia and University Avenues in 1969 broad library services became available for the public. It was decided to discontinue our Coco Plum Library, a project which had served the community for fifty-six years. The doors were closed on April 30, 1969.

Today we do not have a club library per se because there are public and school libraries, However, our members continue to foster the love of books by reading to students at a local public elementary school. Our members donate books, which are displayed at our meetings for purchase. In essence this is a library that serves as a fund raiser as well. Benefits from these books are given to our Education Community Services program.

The future of books and libraries is uncertain. Technology has brought changes to the form by which information, fiction, or non-fiction is received. Online sources have supplanted book stores and libraries. Book stores are being closed. How ironic that a century after our starting a little library, these days we had been facing the potential closing of 14 public libraries in Miami Dade because of financial conditions. Due to pressure from the community, the latest news is that no libraries are to be closed, but hours of service will be cut and employees will be dismissed.

The question is how will future generations receive the written word.

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