

book fair

50 YEARS OF COMMUNITY THROUGH BOOKS

The Rockcliffe Park Public School Book Fair began as a modest venture in 1961 and has grown, over fifty years, to become one of the province's top literary events. The first book fair was a one-day event held in a single classroom at Rockcliffe Park Public School to raise money for the Home and School Association. It was the idea of Admiral Horatio Nelson Lay, a Village resident and head of the school's Parent Committee. "They collected fifty books that year . . . and sold them all," recalled one volunteer.

With the arrival of two remarkable volunteers four years later, the book fair was completely transformed. This marked a turning point in the history of the event. It was 1965 and Joan Askwith and Jane Dobell, two determined women on a mission, wanted to raise money for a new library at Rockcliffe Park Public School, which their children attended, by selling new children's books. The approach they took was unusual.

They would stock the shelves of the book fair with a wide selection of high-quality and hard-to-find children's paperbacks, ones rarely seen in Canada. What better way to promote literacy among school-age children and inspire a love of reading? From that initial dream grew an event that now attracts

thousands, and for years provided one of the largest displays of children's books anywhere in Canada.

With their combined expertise they set to work to hand-select each book for the sale. Jane, a trustee and chair of the Ottawa Board of Education and noted collector of children's books, and Joan, who would co-found The Bookery (a children's bookstore that operated for many years on Sussex Drive), ordered books on consignment from publishing companies such as Penguin and Scholastic Books. Joan spent weeks in the storeroom of National News, perusing hundreds of titles of new books. They chose many from the United States and Great Britain. As Jane explained, "we were passionate about having the best and the most complete range of books available."

They enlisted the help of a remarkable number of volunteers – neighbours, friends, fathers of the children, members of the Home and School Association, and the students themselves. The children of Grades 7 and 8 took an active role, advising on book selection and helping out with the event. Most important, the school principal, Harry C. Redfern, was agreeable to moving the book fair into Queen Juliana Hall, a combined gymnasium and auditorium built as an addition to the school in 1952. It provided a larger



Joan Askwith and Jane Dobell

space to display the growing number of books.

A flyer of 1965 announced the items for sale: 600 paperback titles, an outstanding selection of hardcover children's books "in French and English," records, and second-hand children's books. And, it correctly advised buyers, "You will be surprised at the choice, impressed with the quality and pleased with the price." That year, the book fair was open for three days on Friday, Saturday, and Monday (November 26, 27 and 29). The gross sales were \$3,500 with a net profit of \$722.83.

The next year brought similar success and the organizers continued to concentrate on children's literature, ordering lavishly illustrated picture books, and using booksellers such as Shirley Leishman Books in Ottawa and the Montreal Book Room.

A percentage of the book fair profits was given to the school itself, particularly the school library, as well as to other schools within the Ottawa Board of Education. Profits were used to upgrade school equipment and buy books. Eventually, proceeds from the book sales would reach literacy programs such as the "floating libraries" project in Newfoundland, or libraries around the world. This tradition continues, with a portion of the proceeds each year going to



Are we there yet? How many more books to sort?



The three Di's, determined, diligent, and dynamic.

designated recipients that meet the basic requirement of promoting literacy for children.

Within a short time the book fair was selling second-hand adult books as well as new editions. In the early years the sale of new books played a key part in the fair but this was gradually overtaken by the demand for used books. Appeals for donations for used books were placed in Home and School Bulletins, newspapers and newsletters, even water bills, and the book drive could last the entire year. Donated books were stored in volunteer's basements and, in one instance, at the home of the Netherlands Ambassador in Rockcliffe Park.

By 1967, the book fair organizers enlarged their stock to include educational toys, games and puzzles, posters, maps, and calendars. That same year the fair featured the "Invent-a-Game Contest," an imaginative competition organized by Nancy Hooper and Cynthia

Baxter and open to students who wished to invent a new board game. The judges, including one from Parker Brothers Games Ltd., awarded the first prize to Paul Murphy for his game of "Predict."

Success brought changes, and the need to better organize the various elements. The book fair was structured around a general committee, with a committee chair, a Used Book chair, and other section heads. The committee chair is chosen each year from the pool of volunteers, and many distinguished and dedicated people have served in that position. The annual Committee communications have gone from being handwritten, to typed, to mimeographed, to emailed.

Since 1965, the book fair has been held in Queen Juliana Hall. However, in 1969 the fair was forced to move to other quarters when renovation work was being done at the school. Book Fair opened that year at St. Columba's Church in Manor Park and, despite the change, was still a success. With their growing popularity the organizers added more events to the fair, including a storytelling hour for children, workshops, and a tea room (later replaced by the Café du Monde, which offers a sampling of cuisine from around the world.)

The formula worked, year after year, with volunteer help and continuing support from Rockcliffe Park Public School. This mammoth undertaking required co-ordination and dedication. Volunteers had only a few days to sort through cartons of used books, price them, and arrange them by category in preparation for the grand opening. It was, as one person remarked, all about "buying, selling, fetching, delivering and telephoning." In those years, the books were sorted around a pot-belly stove in Diana Rowley's basement.

In time came more categories of books, including a section for rare books, Canadiana and Antiquarian, art history, antiques, travel, politics, and computers (introduced for the first time in 1983 as "the way of the future.") By 1981, book sale profits had reached almost \$8,000. Over 10,000 new and

second-hand books were sold and 200 volunteers gave their time and expertise.

In 1986, Book Fair celebrated its 25th anniversary. For the occasion, the 420 school children of Rockcliffe Park Public School produced a commemorative book filled with their own stories, poems, drawings, and artwork. Entitled Boys and Girls 1986, it became a best-seller at the fair and raised money to help fund rural primary schools in India. That year marked an important shift in the format of the book fair. For the first time, the event was held from Friday through to Sunday, thus marking a departure from the traditional lineup of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

In 2008, Book Fair transformed once again from selling new and used books to selling only used books. Having grown to include over 64 categories of books on its shelves, 33,000 books sold and 3500 volunteer hours, Book Fair gives Rockcliffe Park



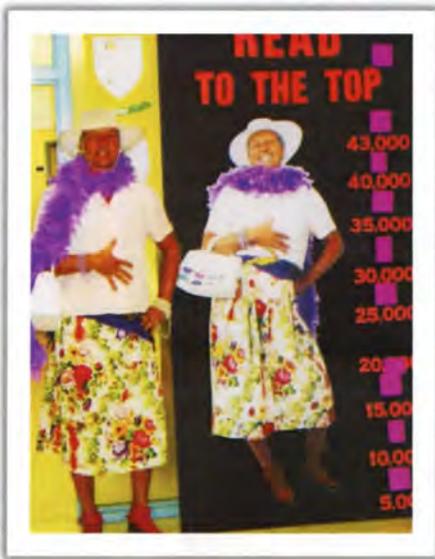
Former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson browsing.



A visit from Clifford.



Farley Mowat signs books for RPPS readers.



Mr. D, encouraging us to read.

approximately \$35,000 to enrich the educational experience of its' students. Private and community sponsors have also been a mainstay of the fair and local businesses continue to contribute to the monumental effort.

Each year a different theme is chosen for the fair and this can range over a number of issues and topics, including "Our Heritage," "Canadian Inventions," "Reading Around the World," "Environment and Literacy," "My Canada," and "Fairy Tales and Legends." Most recently, the theme of "ReadCycle" saw 150 books distributed throughout the world. These books were tracked online so that the children could see who read them and where they were found. This also brought home an environmental message as, each year, book fair becomes a giant diversion of books from the landfill.

Over the years, many talented children's authors have been invited to read to the school classes during the book fair. As well, the popular book signings attract a number of best-selling authors, both Canadian and international, including Dennis Lee, well known for his children's rhymes, Alligator Pie, Jeffrey Simpson, Richard and Sandra Gwyn, Farley Mowat, Malak Karsh, Roch Carrier, Charlotte Gray, Stuart McLean, Robert Mason Lee, Maureen McTeer, Allan Fotheringham, Gordon Robertson, Elizabeth Hay and Brian Doyle. Noted children's authors include Tim Wynne-Jones, Brenda Clark, and Laurent de Brunhof, the famous author and illustrator who continued the Babar series of books created by his



Hard-working parents!

father. In 1977, authors Carol Shields, Tony German, and Charles Ritchie were to share the book signing with John Diefenbaker, who had agreed to autograph copies of his recently published memoirs. He was forced to cancel when he fell ill.

Politicians, governors general, and other dignitaries have been involved in many Book Fair festivities. John Turner presided over the opening ceremonies in 1968, while John Diefenbaker opened the book fair the following year. Lester Pearson and his wife, Landon, participated. When Prime Minister Paul Martin retired from office in 2006, he contributed a collection of books from the official residence at 24 Sussex Drive. Former Governor General Romeo LeBlanc was an enthusiastic buyer, and was often accompanied by security personnel who were laden down with his book purchases. More recently, Laureen Harper, the wife of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, has generously donated her time and expertise to the fair, redesigning book fair's graphics giving it a more polished and professional image. Prime Minister Harper himself has sorted and priced hundreds of books.

Now, the book fair is more than a fundraiser and has become a community event. Many speak of the camaraderie among the volunteers, who enjoy the opportunity to meet every year and to connect with other generations. The list of book fair volunteers over the years is staggering and far too long to mention here. The volunteers continue to work their magic, turning chaos into order and transforming

Queen Juliana Hall into a veritable book bazaar. A core group of volunteers with special expertise in book pricing and assessment has developed over the years, including the "Three Di's" (Diana Ainslie, Diana Bethune, and Diana Rowley), who handle rare books, first editions, and Canadiana by authors such as Lucy Maud Montgomery, Virginia Woolf, and Dr. Seuss. Many of these editions end up in a silent auction of rare and collectible books.

Now, fifty years later, the book fair has grown from a single classroom to fill an entire gymnasium, and from a one-day event to a three-day extravaganza. Instead of days of preparation, it is now a year-round process; as one book fair ends, collection begins for the next. The fair is still held in the month of November but now thousands, instead of hundreds, of visitors enjoy an unprecedented choice in literature. Flyers and posters have given way to a website and Facebook page.

Continuity has been important to the survival of the fair. Jane Dobell is still a presence, and many of the original participants are still involved. Maggie Knaus, chair of Book Fair from 2005 to 2009, acknowledges the rich history of the fair and has expressed confidence for its long-term future: "Book Fair is the definition of community: young and old, teachers and students, parents and children all coming together for the love of books. This combination will always breed success."





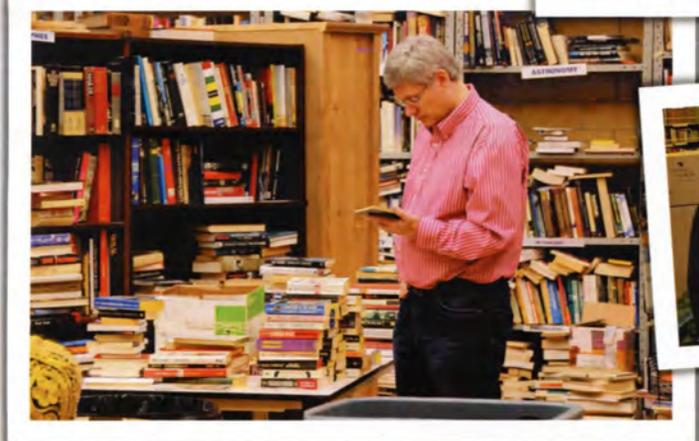
RPPS Royalty



Mrs. Nelles
"Hard Cover Specialist."



Franklin pays a
visit, 2000.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper, long time booksorter.



Sir Reads Alot.



How many books fit in my car?
Maybe I should have bought a van.