

**THE FIRST LADY OF THE LIBRARY  
GLADYS ALLISON  
PIONEERED NORTH YORK'S  
FIRST PUBLIC LIBRARY**

Ten years ago, on June 4, 1987, North York's new Central Library was officially opened as part of the Civic Centre Project which would include the City Hall, hotel, office buildings, and shops, now adjoining Mel Lastman Square.

Almost 100 years earlier, in 1896, the first lending library in the North York area had been set up in the general store of Agnes Hogg on the east side of Don Mills Road, just north of Lawrence Avenue.

The first books, purchased with monies raised by Literary Society concerts, were kept on shelves at the back of the store. Neighbours were welcome to browse and borrow.

In 1918, when James Hamilton Smith took over the store and post office, he didn't want the extra responsibility of running a library, so a new home was sought. James Muirhead offered the use of an abandoned military hut on his property, also donating a Quebec heater and the firewood necessary to fuel it. Pearl Muirhead and Mary Duncan organized the library.

The Public Libraries Board of the Ontario Department of Education sent a librarian to help with the cataloguing and organizing. The little library was awarded county and provincial grants of \$25.00 a year. Funds raised from oyster suppers, concerts and other entertainments provided the annual budget of \$125.00.

Over the years, various lending libraries were set up in stores, churches and schools around the township but most residents depended on the Toronto Public Libraries for their reading materials.

Gladys Allison was one such reader and she regularly took her children to the St. Clements Library on Yonge Street. Originally Gladys Amos, she came to Toronto from England in 1907. An avid reader, she wanted to be a teacher but

her father's illness forced her into work as a clerk. She married Bill Allison and, in 1936, the couple with their three children moved to Hounslow Avenue in Willowdale, further away than she would have liked from the nearest library.

Recognized as the "First Lady of the Library", Gladys was the driving force behind the establishment of a public library system in North York. She began a campaign actively for a library service in 1938.

Both Gladys and Bill were active in community and church affairs, and as president of the Home and School Association, Gladys approached the Provincial Library Service for help. After the war, she set up a library in her church's basement.

A local library association was formed in 1950 and, in that year, North York's first municipally sponsored library opened on the ground floor of the newly completed Memorial Community Hall.

In 1958, plans were made to build a proper library. The new library, called The Gladys Allison Library, was officially opened on October 19, 1959. The day before, Gladys herself laid the cornerstone.

In the 1980's, the plans were afoot to develop the centre of the City of North York. In a 99-year lease agreement, the AVRO Group agreed to build a new library and turn it over to the city.

Construction of the present library began in January, 1985. North York's new Central Library, four times the size of the Gladys Allison Library, was officially opened on June 4, 1987.

Gladys Allison's name lives on in the new building: the sixth floor's Canadiana Department is called the Gladys Allison Room

Jeanne Hopkins, *Looking Back* column, *Bayview Post*, July, 1997, and author of several books on Canadian history.

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