Heart of Campus

The library at 50.

WHERE IS THE HEART OF A UNIVERSITY? THE OXFORD ENGLISH Dictionary reminds us that the heart is the vital or essential part of something.

"Among scholars in all the varied academic disciplines, there is agreement that the heart of the university is its library," Chancellor Joseph Clearihue remarked 50 years ago, on Nov. 14, 1964. "A storehouse for the wisdom of the past, and...a laboratory for all investigations of the present."

The day saw two significant moments in the history of the university: the inauguration of the first president, Dr. Malcolm Taylor, and the opening of the McPherson Library (now the William C. Mearns Centre for Learning/McPherson Library).

The university had come into being on July 1, 1963; the arrival of President Taylor was the end of a journey to establish an autonomous degree-granting institution in the province’s capital. The opening of the library was both a tangible and symbolic sign of this achievement, realized through the philanthropy of T.S. McPherson, whose bequest to the university of $2,250,000 contributed to the library’s construction.

THE SPECIAL CEREMONY TOOK PLACE in the Old Gym, and the band of HMCS Naden provided the music. Harold E. Sexton, Lord Archbishop of BC read the invocation, and Robert Wallace, Dean of Administration, presented President Taylor to Chancellor Clearihue.

Dignitaries from across Canada and abroad came with greetings and congratulations. In attendance were Dr. John B. Macdonald and Dr. Patrick McTaggart-Cowan (brother of Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan, later chancellor of UVic) presidents of the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, respectively. Also present were representatives from the University of Toronto, Saint Francis Xavier University, the University of Aberdeen, University of London, the University of California at Berkeley, and many others.

In his remarks, George R. Pearkes, Lieutenant Governor, brought greetings as a founding member of the convocation and spoke of being present at the laying of the library’s cornerstone the year before.

In addition to the inauguration of the president, the university conferred four Honorary Doctor of Laws degrees. Dr. William Kaye Lamb, Dominion Archivist and National Librarian of Canada, was
among the recipients. Lamb was praised for bringing to scholars “his intimate knowledge of the world of books” and was called “Canada’s official custodian of the record.”

The presentation of a symbolic key — presented by the chancellor to University Librarian Dean Halliwell, architect R.W. Siddal, and contractor Alvin Narod — marked the official opening of the McPherson Library.

The chancellor remarked: “Today we are opening a library that is outstanding in the breadth of its facilities, the excellence of its design, and the efficiency of its staffing...we are paying tribute to the late Thomas S. McPherson, a man who has won the lasting respect of his fellow citizens by his great generosity both to this university and to the city of Victoria.”

The official program booklet included a special insert about the library. It noted the size of the building (86,000 sq ft, or 7989.7 sq metres), cost ($1,415,000), artists (George Norris, façade panels, and Margaret Peterson, “Source of Sources” mosaic, now near the library’s main staircase); materials capacity (315,000 volumes), seating capacity (935), construction (reinforced concrete), and interior finish (walnut, plaster, vinyl fabrics, formica).

The basement contained the curriculum laboratory and the smoking lounge (yes, you read that right), while the third floor included books stacks, student seating, the rare book room, and Xeroxing and mimeographing centre.

**IN THE HALF-CENTURY SINCE ITS** opening, there have been major changes to the library building: an expansion in the early 1970s, and again in 2007 through the generosity of William C. Mearns family, the introduction of electronic library catalogues, digital journals and monographs, increased services for students and faculty in support of teaching, research and student academic success — and a café.

Today library collections include: 2.1 million volumes, 1.4 million microforms, 137,000 journal subscriptions, 21,000 cartographic items, 41,000 sound recordings, 33,000 music scores, 11,000 films and videos, 1,600 linear metres of manuscripts and archival materials, and vast digital resources.

Alumni, students, faculty and community members continue to discover its rich holdings — welcome to the heart of UVic!

— LARA WILSON, MA ’99,
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